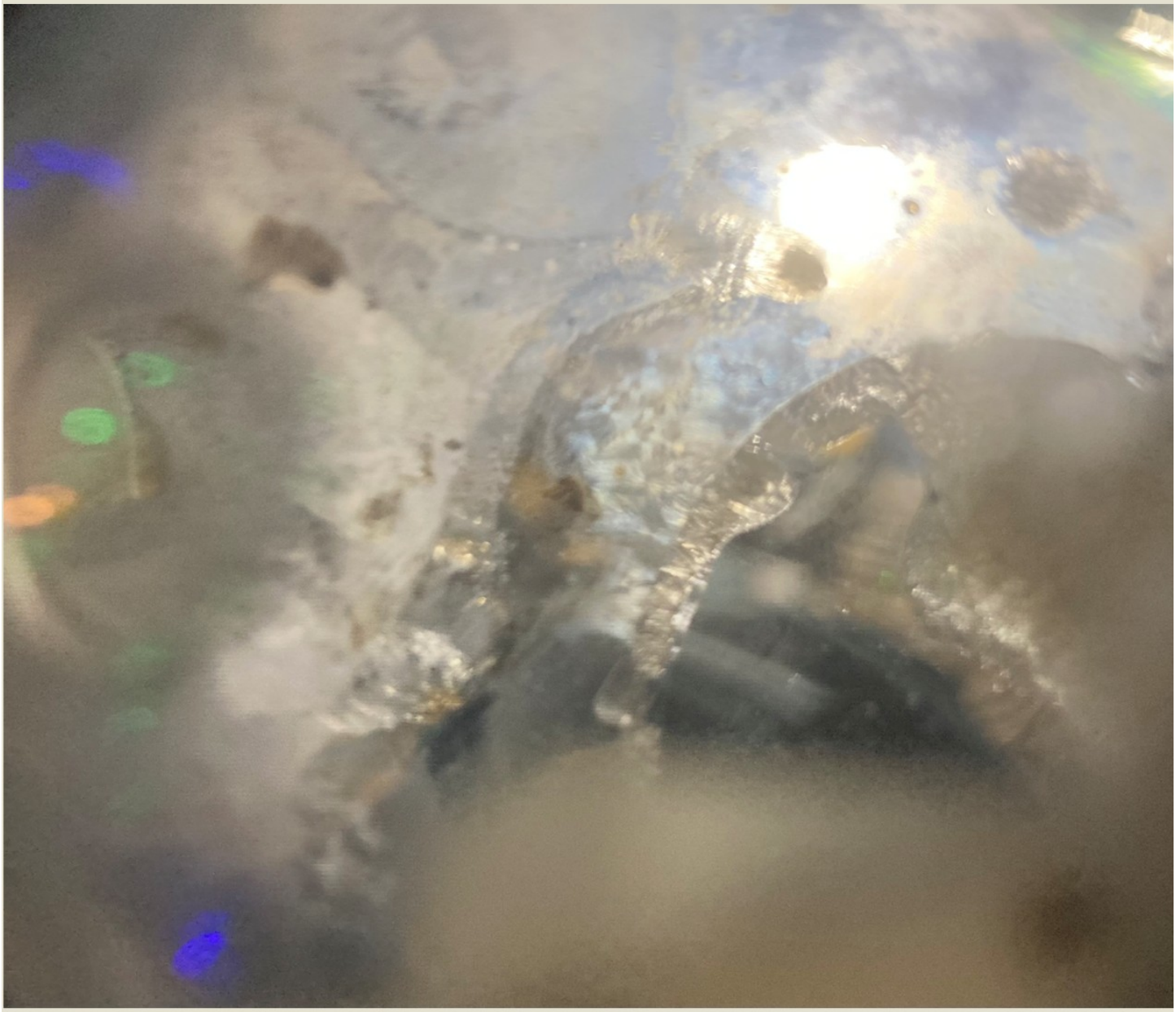
The Harvest Hootenanny - Ninkasi's Most Fabulous Fall Festival, Ever!



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The Harvest Hootenanny – Ninkasi's Most Fabulous Fall Festival, Ever!

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The Hereafter Beckons

I was staring off into the distance, wondering whether or not my life was worth the trouble or if I should just go ahead, shed this mortal coil, and move on to my next incarnation, when I noticed something somewhat odd. Some little thing was darting back and forth across my field of vision. Only, as it crossed from one side to the next, it grew a tad bit larger.

It eventually began to take a recognizable form - that of a messenger, mounted on a winged horse. Not like I was expecting anything of the sort, but I had been awake for several days and nights and would not have been surprised by just about anything I saw - or imagined I saw.

When the rider noticed me staring at him, he made eye contact and was suddenly reining his steed to a halt directly in front of me.

“What - a *Mortal!?!*” he exclaimed, somewhat exasperated.

The steed cleared its throat. “Please forgive my rude colleague,” the flying horse requested. “He’s been somewhat disappointed by his job - not quite as glamorous as he had hoped.”

The messenger took a second to compose himself.

“Well…” he spoke into the horse’s ear, “Can you blame me, really? I mean…a *Mortal*!”

The horse reared its head somewhat and snorted.

“Yeah, well…” the messenger conceded, “This *is* for him, no doubt. But I don't have to *read* it to him.”

The winged horse snorted again.

“Read this, Mortal” he instructed me. “Today is the beginning of an entirely new life for you. Your lucky day, as it were.”

“Very likely,” the messenger proclaimed, then leaned closer to the horse’s ear. “But, just look at him: clueless,” he stage-whispered.

“It’s not your place to judge,” the flying horse chastised his rider, who promptly held out a very formal-looking packet, with a name I recognized embossed in gold on the front. The envelope even had a wax seal.

“Just read this…” the horse began, but was cut short by the rider, who reined the steed around and urged to get along with a gentle nudge of his heels.

“I’m sure he'll figure things out for himself,” the rider said.

“He does look kinda clueless, perhaps….” The horse began to say, but the messenger cut him off.

“**Best of luck, Mortal!**” he shouted as the horse beat its wings and they soared off into the partly-cloudy sky.

Of course, I immediately opened the packet and found an invitation.

“Greetings Gaian,” I read aloud. That seemed odd. I don't use my wizard name at all. I doubt there are even half a dozen people who know it!

I was perplexed, to say the least. I gave my head a shake in an attempt to clear the confusion, then continued to mumble aloud: “…I am pleased to extend you this invitation, that you may

attend the Harvest Hootenanny! When you are prepared to make your appearance, read the invitation aloud, and please do…”

As I read, the few clouds in the sky above and around me appeared to grow larger, until they engulfed my entire field of vision. A woman’s voice accompanied mine, until I stopped and looked around.

I discovered I was no longer in a grassy mountain meadow, surrounded by towering Douglas Firs, but stood in the foyer of a Grand Hall, where a woman spoke directly to me, though she remained with the script. Or perhaps she was dictating? I had no idea what was going on at this point. (*Not like I’ve never experienced **that** before.*) “…be a dear and bring along some ganja - we haven’t had any good weed around here for ages.” She finished for the both of us, “Thanks, and I look forward to meeting you, Ninkasi.”

The person who addressed me was absolutely the curviest woman I have ever seen. Not quite plump, but soft-looking and definitely round in all the right places. She was affixing a pin in the coils of her long, tightly curled hair as she spoke. She looked disappointed and took a deep breath. “Oh, I ***do*** wish you had read over the invitation before departing!”

“No, worries!” I assured her, and lifted my right hand to display a largish, tightly wrapped plastic bag. “Five pounds of my favorite weed, ever!” I exclaimed triumphantly. Still no idea what was going on: I just imagined I had the weed, and there it was.

“And…” I held up the other hand, which somehow managed to brandish a similar bag. “…five pounds of the best weed I ever smoked - some Colombian Red-Hair!” Then added, in a semi-hushed voice, “I have a thing for Redheads,” just as I noticed her auburn hair. My inner self cringed, while I slightly shrugged my shoulders.

She gave her head a slight tilt. “Zoë, Chloe!” she called, and identical twin servants rushed to her side. “Take these to the psychedelics table. Portion them out a pound at a time, apiece.” She hadn't taken her eyes off me while she gave her orders. She added, “Well, you *ARE* a surprise! Thank you so much!”

“Anything for YOU, babe!” I replied as she turned away, no doubt to attend to her duties as hostess. The servant girls’ eyes grew wide with shock, but their mistress merely cast a glance over her bare shoulder, began to say something, then changed her mind, smirked, and walked away. My, how her hips rolled with each step! The servants’ expressions grew more exaggerated, and they looked at one another with their mouths open wide. They recovered their composure enough to follow their mistress. With nothing else to do, I trailed along behind them.

Zoe and Chloe

“And Chloe…” she added as she walked ahead of us, “…make sure he’s presentable before he makes his entrance, and see to it that he drinks this beforehand. All of it!” She handed a goblet full of a very intoxicating-looking beverage to one of the servants. A nice sleight-of-hand move of her own, I thought admiringly. What else could one expect from a Goddess – She who gave us Mortals the gift of beer, Ninkasi?

"This way, Mortal!" one of the twin servants all but commanded me. The size of the foyer and the Grand Hall it
led to did seem to swallow sound, so I supposed she was merely trying to make sure I heard her. Turns out, she's
sassy. Quite, very sassy.

The twins, Chloe and Zoë: They are some exotic humanoid species. Their skin is slightly blue-hued, verging on white for the most part, but with darker blue stripes along the shoulders, which continued down the tops of their arms. There are similar stripes which extended from just below their armpits, along the curves of their waists and hips, and continued down the outside portion of their legs, ending just below the ball joint of their ankles, with another stripe along the insides of their legs. They have silver hair and their eyes are light blue instead of white, with silver irises. They stand just around five feet tall, with very dainty features. They look kinda fragile, like porcelain dolls. Despite their petite size, they are very curvy, like their mistress, only still a little bit on the lean side. Their curves seem to be exaggerated, compared to the rest of their bodies. And by that, I mean they have fairly huge boobs. On second thought, let’s just say they have huge boobs. They also seem to always smile - real, genuine smiles. They clearly adore Ninkasi. When she addresses them, their eyes light up. I mentioned their eyes were silver-hued, right? When their eyes light up, they actually *shine*. Plus, I don't know if it's pheromones or just their general attitude - so eager to please - but I cannot help but become aroused in their presence. *(I later found out that it is indeed pheromones, and that they are extremely…horny. All the time. They are all over each other when they think no one’s looking.*) They are beguilingly beautiful, and constantly change their hairstyles, but rarely their clothing. They apparently detest clothing, and wear tiny scraps of fabric here and there, or go totally naked. But, I’m getting ahead of the story.

There are huge pillars regularly spaced along the entrance to the Grand Hall, made of grey, polished marble so reflective, they can be used as mirrors. I caught a glimpse of myself and almost gagged. "*Ai!*" I exclaimed, "I need a shower, a shave, and...something **has** to be done about my hair!"

As I began to pass another column, I decided to stop and take a closer look. My beard and mustache were well-trimmed all of a sudden, my hair partially pulled into a ponytail at the top of my skull, though much of it was left dangling down my neck, past the shoulders, ears exposed, with little ribbons of loose hair alongside the cheeks. My ears were now pierced, and little silver studs inserted, with a matching one on the right side of my nose. I was about to complain about the piercings, but...well...I looked so damned good! And clean. I smelled clean, too.

One of the twins asked me, "Well, Gaian - what is it that you do?"

The other one chimed in, "Describe yourself with one word!"

I was still distracted by the sudden change in my appearance, so I didn’t give the question much thought before answering: "I'm a war wizard, I suppose," I said without hesitation. (*Notice I also didn’t hesitate to violate the “one word” limit one of the SERVANTS tried to impose? Yah – homie don’t play that!*)

"You suppose?!?" the twins said to one another. They were definitely let down by my reply.

"Another fighter!" one of them said, shaking her head in disapproval.

The other one drew a deep breath. "It's like the only thing they know," she sighed. They looked sad.

"Yes, a war wizard - haven't lost one yet!" I exclaimed, then leaned towards them and added, with a conspiratorial whisper; "but I only go to war when there is no other option. Otherwise, I play music and sing."

Now the twins were more than a little confused, and they both tried to say something, but could not convince words to venture from their mouths. They looked at me as if I were a very large dog who turned out to be very friendly. Chloe motioned me to continue towards the Grand Hall. When I passed another column, I couldn't help but notice I was now clad in some sort of light armor, with gizmo-looking things along the top part of my lower arms, which came to points just as they reached the wrists. It was all black. I also had a dark-green cloak tied behind me, over the shoulders. I looked formidable.

One of the twins held her chin with a hand and nodded her approval. The other one stared at me with wide eyes. "Be bigger!" she practically panted.

“Okay,” I thought, “Ninkasi’s crowd is famously very large…”

I said aloud: "Make me 6'2", with a build like I had when I was 46," I said.

*(I **know!** – 6’2” isn’t “very large.” I’m 5’9” IRL. So there. I wanted to be able to navigate the terrain of this realm without having to worry about dragging my toes across a thick carpet, which could potentially cause me to lose my balance AND collect enough Static Electricity to fire a lightning bolt. Likely at some random target.)*

(It could happen!)

The second twin's eyes grew rounder. "Bigger!" she huffed. Her sister gave her an elbow to the side.

"He's fine!" she admonished.

"Aye! That he is!" the other sister replied. They both giggled.

Just as I was about to descend into the Grand Hall, Chloe handed me the flagon of a rather dark ale Ninkasi had given her. It looked to be around 22 oz., with a thin, dark head of foam around the edge. "Drink this. Now!" she demanded, and the twins each laid a hand on my shoulders.

I was very curious about what was to be found at the bottom of the stairs. I had a glimpse of a huge banquet feast, laid out on several huge, long, ovalish tables, with many, many Beings scattered around them, mostly in clusters. It looked like any large party should, at least it did to me. I’m totally okay with seeing nightmare-inducing creatures lurking around, and in some cases mingling with other, non-nightmare-type Beings. Unless they interact with ME, specifically, I write them off as hallucinations or Someone Else’s Problem.

Also, there were wandering minstrels strolling around, playing songs with an astonishing variety of instruments.

At a casual glance, I was relieved to see it would not be much different than any festival I'd attended. I stood near the top of the stairway and made an attempt to raise the flagon to my lips. Instead, I nearly tripped down the steps, as the twins gave me slight shoves to help me along the way.

When one of my feet found the first step, a female voice rang out from above: "Introducing Gaian, First Wizard of - and father to - Autonomia, Goddess of the Everywhen!"

I later found out that when a newcomer makes an entrance into Ninkasi's Grand Hall, they are welcomed with "Introducing..." so everything present knows it's their first experience in the...hmmm...in their presence. I'm tempted to describe this place as "the afterlife." But, the fact remains: at this point in the story, I was still...

"A **MORTAL**?!?" somebeing groused, and conversation paused while most of the crowd turned their heads to have a look. I mentioned that I looked formidable, right? Before I began to continue the descent into the Grand Hall, I stopped and raised the flagon Chloe had given me, high above my head.

"To Ninkasi, the *intoxicating* Goddess of Brewing!" I shouted.

"**Praise Ninkasi!**" The response was all but deafening, as was the clattering of metal flagons and the crashing of
glass goblets a few seconds later, after the attendees had drained them.

"There! I seem to have won that round!" I congratulated myself.

(Won it Big Time, as it turns out. These Ancient Ones are really, really into toasting.

For one thing – they like to drink. Especially beer. For another thing, this party is at Ninkasi's place. The Goddess. Of Beer. They were looking for any excuse to down a pint or so of Divine Brew so as to get to the next. The more they drank at Ninkasi's place, the more she had to bust out her private casks and kegs, and also leftovers from previous batches.

Let's just go ahead and tell you about the Divine Brews...)

(*We Really Should Get Back to the Story*)

*(You **know** how I feel about toasting! Chapter Titles Person. Bear with me for just a while longer – this is sorta important stuff I'm relating, hear? It helps set the mood, you know…Patience! Titles Person, you just have to indulge me this ONE TIME. Okay? Deal?*

Good, I really hate short chapters. But…it might not be the only time…sorry…sorta…)

Now, back in the day, Beers and Ales were much denser than what we have now. And crunchy. They didn't filter out the grains, though the hops could, if they were left in as well. Beings eventually decided hops were mostly in the way, they liked crunchy beverages, and they NEEDED crunchy beverages.

*Ninkasi's first offerings were not like the ones these days in other ways, too. I'm not privy to their halls of records/libraries as of yet, but one estimate I heard is that her typical batch in the early days was often upwards of around 50 percent alcohol by volume. That's 100 proof, for those keeping score at home. And her STRONG brews? No one wants to put a number on them, but the popular folklore – there is **folklore** about Ninkasi - has it, the strong brews were over 90 percent alcohol! She's so awesome. And hot. I think I've mentioned that already, but it's worth repeating: She is **so** curvy and hot!*

*I get crushes on gals way too easily, but…she has auburn hair. Just about my favorite! And curves. Divine Curves. *ahem**

So…the Ancients NEEDED crunchy beer…

The grains would tend to become saturated in alcohol. The fiber and oils of the grains are more difficult for the body to digest than volatile liquids, like alcohol. The thinking goes: grains will give one a "full" feeling, like one's just finished a satisfying meal. Therefore, one won't be ABLE to drink so much as to get a hangover, and can nurse along a pint all night, and the fun never ends.

*However, when one is at a **party,** and **all the beer** available was made by the **Goddess of Brewing**!*
***HERSELF**! With **HER OWN, TWO HANDS!** Why would one wish NOT to **DRINK THE BEER?!?** Is one **stupid**? **What** is one **thinking**?*

Ninkasi's very proud of her craftsGoddesship. She worked diligently for 100,000 years to perfect it! Keeps herself busy with variations these days.

So, toasting is a big deal, and one wishes to drink as much beer as a Being of one's sort is able. The thing is, Ninkasi likes the dark, heavy stuff. Even the lightest of her Amber Ales is almost too dark to see light through. ***They*** *take longer to digest. So, what this basically means is – one is drunker than one realizes. The beer is just still down there, making its way through your digestive system. One will feel it soon enough. Meanwhile, the toasts are coming at one throughout the night. Good times are certain to ensue, or at least very memorable moments. For some of the celebrants. Many would get blacked-out drunk and not remember a thing.*

Anyways - there's just not enough toasting these days. It's ***fun****! It can be a competitive sport! It can just be a challenge! It can be a hidden insult! It can be a secret threat! It can be a marriage proposal, answered by another toast! Leading to a toast to the betrothed!* ***[Perhaps. One would hope so. A negative reply to a marriage proposal made at a party would just bring everybody down, and Beings would feel awkward afterwards. One doesn't want to be THAT Being. The solution? A toast to the proposer, sure to list the many positive attributes this Being would bring to the Divine Partnership, followed by "Let me sleep on it!" And a toast "To sleeping on it!" and another; "Here's to *the couple*! May they sleep on it for as long as it takes!" See what I'm saying? Fun that leads to Beings getting really, really drunk. Drunker than they even realize they are!]***

So – there are ranking orders for toasts. When one is attending a Divine Gathering of some sort or other, it is usually the host/hostess who makes the opening toast – one all present are expected to participate in. There is no "rule" about this, just custom.

According to custom, if one wished to make a toast for all to participate in, BEFORE the hostess/host did, one was expected to toast the host/hostess. When I arrived, it was still early in the proceedings. When I made a toast upon my entrance to the entire Hall before me, the Beings rejoiced! Now, the drinking could begin in earnest!

And Ninkasi isn't about to be one-upped by a Mortal, in her own Sacred Hall! Nope. So, when she came out to give her greetings and the "opening" toast, she broke out a very special, distilled brew, likely from her private stock. One of those "maybe 190 proof…?" ones I've heard rumors of…

AND – just so she could not feel slighted by my usurpation of her opening toast, for the rest of the harvest festival, any time she made an entrance, she was greeted by a toast! As is the custom.

So, without realizing it, I made quite a good impression right from the start – for a Mortal.)

The Hootenanny... (*I need to see some positive title about toasting here, Chapter Titles Person!*)

Toasting is a Lot of Fun, and People Should Do More of It! (*Thank you!*)

There I was, at the top of the stairs, looking over the many attendees who were busy searching for servants with trays of frothy ales. I tried to down the very dark ale in my own flagon.

Big mistake! It was likely the strongest beer I'd ever tasted. I swallowed about one-third of the brew and began to lose my balance. But - it was so delicious! So smooth! I made a second attempt, but went a little more slowly this time. Still only got about one-third of it down, and continued down, along the stairway. *Tried* to continue down, along the stairway. My foot could not quite figure out where those danged steps had gotten off to, so I waved it around a little, hoping it would come to its senses and understand: the stairs had *not* gone and crept away while I wasn't looking.

What did I expect? This was a special brew the Goddess of Brewing herself made for her Harvest Hootenanny! **Of course** it was the most delicious, most intoxicating beer I'd ever encountered!

It was so strong, and so madly hopped up, I began to feel a hangover coming on as I made my third - and final! - attempt to down it. But, I'm beginning to get ahead of the story. Again. (*I do tend to try to rush things along a bit when I'm excited about something. And who wouldn't be excited to have been invited to the Grand Hall of one of the Immortals? To hang out with her crowd? I really should relax and appreciate what I'm experiencing more often.*

At least that's not my worst habit. My worst habit is over-explaining things. I oftentimes go into the background details of whatever it is I want to say to the extent that I never

get around to making the point I wanted to when I started. Which leads me to try to rush through things in order to get to the point.

See, I was doing it just now! Over-explaining. I should really…nevermind…)

So…I made it to floor level without incident, though I have no idea where I tossed the flagon when I was through with it…I seem to think one of the twins caught it just as I let it go…? Maybe it slipped out of my hand…? and she spared me the embarrassment of offending one of the Ancients if it smacked them on the noggin…?

I could hear some grumbling when I reached the floor: "A ***Mortal***!"

"What's **HE** doing here!"

"Say, he's **cute**!"

Ninkasi was standing with a gaggle of Goddesses when one of them made the "cute" comment.

"It's MY banquet, and he's MY guest!" she said loudly enough for every Goddess in attendance to hear.

I turned my head in her direction to see that her comment had truly gotten the attention of her colleagues. They were staring at her all of a sudden. Some of them were pleasantly astonished, some were amazed. A few were miffed and angrily drank from their newly-arrived goblets.

Durga *(She's easy to recognize, because she pretty much always wears some sort of armor when in public. Just in case. One never knows when someone will wrong one out of the blue. Or get drunk and decide they have some sort of score to settle with one. Or…ummm…Durga…)* put a hand on Ninkasi's nearest shoulder.

“You like this fella?” she asked. “After all this time, you’re interested in having a man in your life?”

It had been a long time since Ninkasi had a male love interest. She was devastated when her younger brother was murdered by their eldest brother. Rumor has it, she was expecting to marry him, at some point. Under their homeworld’s laws, children born of a union between brother and sister were awarded special privileges. Brother/Sister marriages were fairly commonplace.

Ninkasi had her eyes firmly set on me, again - after she had given a brief, glaring glance toward Nanaya when the Goddess of Brewing made her claim on me.

Ninkasi didn't reply to Durga and lifted her own goblet to those plump, so, so sexy lips of hers. I nearly stumbled again when I saw how she was looking at me – she appeared to be sizing me up as if she were looking over the menu of Ki's restaurant - if the Goddess of Life Itself had one.

I was at a loss as to what to do with myself, then noticed a rather large table, laid out with every psychedelic food imaginable. Truth be told - many of the items there were well beyond my imagination. I immediately set off for the table, and began to gobble everything on offer. I also helped myself to some of my favorite weed, ever! SDLA – a hybrid made from the very aromatic Sour Diesel and Cannabis Cup Award-winning LA Confidential, developed by a grower friend. A very laid-back high, so long as one doesn’t take more than one puff. Otherwise…

well, hope one has no plans for the day, because one will be busy wondering why the world never seemed so very, intricately intriguing before.

Around the tray laden with the ganja I'd provided (*somehow or other*) were an assortment of pipes, rolling papers, and bongs. I stuffed some SDLA into the bowl of a pipe and lit it with a nearby candlestick.

Truly, I was in heaven.

As I bit into an *amanita muscaria*, the voice from above announced: "Now arriving, the *playful* Goddess of Chaos, Eris!"

There were a few, scattered cheers, but they were drowned out by wolf whistles and cat-calls. Naturally, I turned to have a look, stopped chewing and nearly choked on the crunchy mushroom.

Eris is the Goddess I devoted my (mortal) life to. I didn't so much worship her as I adored her. I had a huge crush on her when I was a kid and never really got over it. Though I venerate her above all the Immortals, I tend to regard her more as a companion, a mentor, a muse.

(*Okay - I **love** her. I love her so much, but fear her almost as much, so I try to keep my mind as reverent as possible when I address or think about her. She can be fairly fierce when she wants. It's possible we've been lovers at times. I mean - we have a daughter. Or, will one day.*

It's complicated.)

I'm afraid I haven't been a very good disciple of hers. As I've complained numerous times – I have no one to instruct me on how to interact with her. The Sumerian religions were long-forgotten in their original form, for millennia, before I came along. The name I know for her is Greek, for example.

The original Mesopotamian Myths evolved into Hindu, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, even Mesoamerican religions, over time. Even so, we've lost a lot of their stories, and their customs are all but unknown to us. Though the one thing we can say for certain about them - they are the horniest fucking things, ever!

And there Eris stood, atop the Grand Stairway – looking all the world like the most incredibly beautiful Goddess anybeing could ever hope to see. Her face made her look damned near Angelic, she's so pretty. Except, the way the rest of her is shaped kinda prevents anybeing from having anything but the most carnal/lustful thoughts in mind while viewing her.

Eris's gown spoke thunderous, elaborate volumes about just how sexy she is. As I am famously quoted amongst the Immortals, "She is the sexiest, most beautiful female anything, ever!"

Her gown looked like a normal, formal Grand Ball gown. When she wasn't in motion. The slightest movement of her limbs, torso, or head - any part of her - and the threads flew apart to show the flesh they otherwise kept more-or-less concealed.

She was moderately surprised to hear the cheering and other displays of appreciation her appearance elicited. I swear, she even blushed slightly. Then she blew kisses to those who whistled and called.

"Tch!" a voice behind me grumbled loudly enough for half the hall to hear, "One of the Truly Ancients, and she dresses like a harlot!"

I dropped the mushroom I had completely forgotten about, and all but screamed "**NEVER speak about my daughter's mother like that again!**" I wheeled about and punched the trash-talker in the chin with everything I had. I even had to leap a little, as he was more than a foot taller than me. Or, as I was at the time.

I admit, it was a suckerpunch, and those really are a no-no. Still...the punch caught him completely off guard, knocked him onto his heels, and laid him out flat on his back, unconscious.

Everything came to a sudden stop. The Immortals looked bewildered. Some of them looked terrified, as if their entire view of reality had just shattered and scattered to the wind, never to be seen again. They looked from the prone figure on the ground, to me; then to the guy laid out on the ground, then to me…

"Oooooohhhh!" most of them finally said. What I'd proclaimed as I punched out the jackass who'd berated my Goddess, my Love, revealed to them the "Why" of "Why is there a stinking MORTAL here?!?"

All but lost in the space between when reality slipped out to powder its nose (*or something*) and came back into focus, was the sound of a goblet shattering at the foot of the Grand Stairway.

Murmuring returned, as many of the Immortals made their way over to where I stood, shaking my hand and looking it over for damage. It *was* numb. Some of the less affected celebrants came to pat me on the back, some to warn me to flee for my life! For the sake of my Immortal Soul!

As for me, I was distracted by the sound of a goblet shattering, which quickly disappeared into the momentary,
deafening silence that gripped Ninkasi's Sacred Hall. Eris stood at the foot of the Grand Stairway, her hand frozen in the certainty it still held the goblet which lay in little bits all over the floor.

I attempted to move through the crowd, but they were pressing against me, eager to offer their praise and/or condolences.

Ninkasi was the first to reach Eris's side. She gently took the Chaos Goddess's raised hand, then helped her sit down on the stairway.

"Oh, Ninkasi," Eris sobbed, as tears poured from her eyes. "No one's ever, ever stood up for me before. Not in three-and-a-half-million years…"

Her voice cracked with emotion, and I could hear every word, despite the crush and commotion of the crowd around me.

"Oh, Ninkasi - I'm in love." Eris continued. "With all my heart and soul, everything I am and everything I've ever been and will ever be, I'm in love."

She took her gaze away from me. I doubt she could see anyway, with the tears, the crowd, and Ninkasi desperately trying to hug her.

"I'm totally, completely, and madly in love, and it frightens me so..." she lunged at the Brewing Goddess. "Oh, my sweet Ninkasi, whatever is to become of me?" The Goddess of Chaos collapsed into Ninkasi's arms and wailed aloud, so that the crowd around me began to take notice.

Before I could make my way to them, Ninkasi summoned servants to help with Eris. Several of them came to assist Ninkasi in raising the Inconsolable Embodiment of Chaos onto her feet and off to her usual bed chamber in Ninkasi's Sacred Halls.

The Brewing Goddess was issuing orders to various servants when Chloe put a hand on my arm to prevent me from reaching over to try to hug either of the Goddesses - or both of them.

Chloe was about to say something, when Ninkasi saw me and plunged through the crowd toward me. She took my hands into hers. And I noticed there were fat tears rolling down her lovely, round cheeks.

"Oh, Gaian - oh, my darling Gaian," she said as her voice began to break up. "This is one of the happiest moments of my life! You...*sniff*...you're my *hero*!" Her voice squeaked a little just then. "No one has ever...ever...dear Gaian." She took a moment to wipe her face and compose herself, then explained: "That fucking asshole killed my sweet, dear brother!"

She pulled me to her. Damn, that woman is strong! Beneath that soft skin are thick, strong muscles. "I'll love you forever! There's no one like you!"

I had no words. I cast a quick, concerned glance toward Eris as she disappeared into the clouds which seemed to swirl around and...***do*** things...when needed.

The two Goddesses I revered above all others - fuck, just about the only Immortals I even *like* - had both professed their eternal love to me in less than three minutes. I was doomed.

"Eris will be fine," Ninkasi explained, "I've got a brew for every occasion, and she'll be back to...our new normal...soon enough."

"Oh," she continued when she saw my confused, concerned expression. "I suppose you Mortals haven't been keeping up with our doings for a while, have you?"

Though she was still rolling out the tears, she smiled now - a huge, loving, gracious smile.

"Eris is my wife!" Ninkasi said with discernable pride. I was even more befuddled by her words. I wasn't sure I knew how language **do** at that point. "We're married."

"Ya'll can do that...?" I started to ask.

"Gaian," she said as if she really shouldn't have to explain herself. "We're Goddesses - we do whateverthefuck we want!"

"Well...the Law doesn't really..." I began again, words failing me. Patriarchal civilizations are obsessed with laws. They're so lAwful!

"And I'm sure I speak for the both of us when I say, as of now - we're married, too."

The language thing still wasn't quite getting the job done for me. I struggled to discern a reason why people made noises with their mouths. There was something I was *not* getting.

"The three of us; you, me, and Eris - we're married." She pulled my face down to hers and kissed me on the cheek.

Then it hit me like a proverbial shit-ton of bricks.

"Marduk..." I began. Ninkasi's face receded from mine.

She was crying through a beaming, huge smile. "The mightiest of all the Immortals, even the Truly Ancients," she exclaimed. "So powerful, no one dares stand against him! And you knocked him right the fuck out!" She swung a fist between us to illustrate. So cute – Ninkasi's so animated and cute.

"Here!" She threw her arms wide. "In my Sacred Hall! No one will ever forget your first appearance amongst us! Nothing this exciting has happened in ages! If ever!"

The tears began to roll down her cheeks again.

"No one dares stand against Marduk, not even to slightly disagree with him. They're all so afraid of him since he killed my dear, sweet brother." She wiped her face again.

"And you laid him right out! You! A Mortal!" She sniffed a little and blew her nose.

"I can't remember ever feeling this happy." She turned to follow Eris into the clouds.

"Oh, you are sooo gonna get it, mister!" she threatened over a bare, round shoulder. And sexy. Very cute, vary curvy, very sexy: My **wife**, Ninkasi.

"*Ai, caramba!*" I thought aloud, "...I certainly am." I looked back to Marduk, still on his back, one foot a-twitch.

"I am sooo gonna get it." I took a long, deep breath. Zoë offered me another flagon.

"I'd get good and drunk if I were you," she advised. "You might not be around much longer."

"I am so doomed," I exclaimed to myself, then began to make my way back to the psychedelics table.

"Zoë," I asked before she could get away, "is there any chance I could get a flagon of a brew that takes away pain and helps one heal from a minor injury?"

"I'll have to ask my mistress, but I'm sure she will allow me to bring you one," Zoë said as she began to disappear into the clouds.

Those clouds…they seem to be almost sentient, and respond to signals that something is needed.

They apparently transport people around the Sacred Hall, fetch stuff when someone calls for said stuff, and Ninkasi walks around on a pair of tiny clouds instead of wearing shoes. She's so cute, tip-toeing around barefooted. She even wears little bells on gold chains around her ankles, so she chimes as she trots around. But…back to the story…(*so fucking cute*)…

I picked up another *amanita* and bit into it, then began to ponder my immediate fate as I watched Marduk begin to come back to consciousness. “Things could go very badly for me, once he’s back on his feet,” I thought.

It’s Complicated

Eris and Ninkasi lay next to one another on Ninkasi’s bed, holding hands. The tears had dried and they lay quietly, composing their thoughts…

Ninkasi broke the silence. “I told him we’re married, the three of us.”

“Well, of course we are!” Eris replied. “Are we going to have a celebration at last? Exchange vows and the like – the three of us?”

“Well, of course we are!” Ninkasi teased. “We’re going to have the biggest, wildest, most drunken wedding celebration ever!”

“Oh, dear!” Eris suddenly sat upright. “Darling, we have to go protect him from Marduk. He’s going to be sooo angry! You know how he gets.”
.

Anyone other than Eris could never have gotten away with such a statement. Marduk had murdered Ninkasi's beloved brother, but no one dared to bring it up in polite conversation. Mostly, they tended to act as if it never happened.

Marduk had actually attempted to kill Eris once. Instead, he made more of her. In other words, he shattered the Primordial MegaBeing which formerly included Eris - Tiamat – into pieces. Some was now dust, some became the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, some became Mars. This happened long ago, when the Most Ancients had not taken creature form, and were mostly stars and planets. Big planets, like Jupiter, Saturn, or Neptune. A few of those planets' moons are bits of Tiamat, too.

Nowadays, most of the Ancients seem to be very pleased with their humanoid form - though some of the Ancients and Truly Ancients preferred to keep earlier forms, seeing as they have a terrifying effect on Mortals. Seriously, some Mortals would just drop dead just at the *sight* of those Immortals.

Ninkasi sat up to lay a soothing hand on her wife's shoulder. "It'll be fine, dear. The brew for this banquet is specially made to quell violent urges. We don't want a repeat of last year's Noodle Incident, now do we?

"Should someone attempt to throw a punch, instead…" Ninkasi made a face to show how satisfied she was with
the uncanny timing of this particular brew, "…their hand will fly up, over their head…" she demonstrated "…and they'll do a pirouette. For as long as their violent urges last."

Eris' face broke into a mischievous grin.

"And should someone decide to kick somebeing or thing," the Goddess of Brewing continued, "instead they'll dance a merry jig until their anger goes away, or they pass out from exhaustion."

"Oh, my darling!" Eris said, her voice dripping with affection, "You are one *devious* babe. No wonder I love you so." She reached up and stroked Ninkasi's hair. Ninkasi leaned over to enable more of the same, when Zoë burst into the bed chamber.

"My lady!" she spoke as she took a knee, "the Mortal has asked to be given a flagon of your Revitalizing Brew."

Ninkasi didn't look Zoë's way. Her eyes were only for Eris at the moment, as she leaned closer still and raised her hands to Eris's shoulders in order to undress her.

"Certainly!" Ninkasi said. "Consider him the man of the house, Zoë, and tell the others to do the same. His requests are to be taken as commands. And let him know as well. He can request anything he desires."

The Brewing Goddess loosened the bands which held Eris's gown in place. It fell into the Goddess of Chaos' lap, while Ninkasi reached up to take Eris's cheeks into her hands, then pulled her beloved's face down to hers. Their lips met as Eris put her arms around Ninkasi to pull her closer still.

"Those two…" Zoë thought. "…wish I could stay and watch…" Instead, she did her mistress's bidding and left them.

She began to scheme about how to get laid, soon after the Mortal had the brew he requested.

Back in the Grand Hall

Marduk was enraged as he came back to his senses. He sat up and shook his head to clear out the cobwebs he was sure were within, but immediately regretted it. Pain pulsated from his jaw to the back of his head, which had somewhat fractured when he fell over. His head actually did more damage to the marble floor than the floor did to him.

“That Mortal!” he said as he began to push himself up from the floor and onto his feet. “Where is that **Mortal**?” he raised his fist…and it flew wildly above his head as he danced a fine pirouette. Then another, and another.

“**NINKASI!**” he screamed, “**Curse you and your silly brews!**” He tried to stomp or kick a table full of food. Instead, he danced a merry jig. He was incensed now. The angrier he got, the merrier and more intense his dance became.

The drunker and tripping Hootenanny attendees were bewildered at first, but several of them leapt over to his side and began to dance with him. Which only angered him more. The wandering musicians wandered over in order to accompany the dancing with their music. Soon, half the Hall was dancing, laughing, and offering Marduk morsels to eat and more beer to drink.

Though he was enraged at first, eventually Marduk began to enjoy himself. Somewhat. No one had ever seen that side of him, and when Marduk noticed others watched him with wide grins and intoxicated smiles on their faces, he scowled at them, which only made his own dancing more frantic.

Just as a sun began to rise outside the Grand Hall, Marduk was overcome with exhaustion, fell to his knees, bent over at the waist to rest his weight on all fours and catch his breath.

A hand appeared before his face and put forward a flagon of a very different smelling and colored brew than the ones he had earlier.

“Here,” a voice - disturbingly familiar and unknown to him at the same time - urged, “Drink this - it’s supposedly good for everything that ails you.” I snorted at the unintended pun. I was quite, very drunk at this point - though I had not felt any effects from the psychedelics I’d eaten all night.

(*Couldn’t quite come to grips with that. After two hours of all but nonstop gobbling of psychedelics to no effect, I taught the minstrels “I couldn’t get high” by the **Fugs**, and jammed on it with them, on my instrument of choice – a 1960s Ovation acoustic/electric 12-string guitar, which appeared from out of the clouds when I asked if one were available.*

I was a little out-of-practice. Still, we did the best, most epic version of the song, ever! Some of the revelers were in tears! Afterwards, the minstrels bowed to me and took a break. We had jammed on the simple, 3-chord tune for almost an hour. Several of the more skilled players took turns as featured soloists. I was urged to take a turn, but instead nodded to others to take it. After about another half an hour, inspiration, drunkenness, and the joy of playing with people so talented they could make just about anything work, I took a turn - and it turned out magnificently!

I rarely play the solos and fills in the songs I perform - not even the ones I’ve composed - as I try to recruit better
guitarists to handle those chores in the bands I form or join. Was it the enchanted beer, the thrill of meeting the Immortals, including Goddesses I adore? Was it the inspiration of the minstrels, who easily picked up the “3-chord,” blues-based rock tune and took it to unparalleled heights? No matter the inspiration, I was on fire!

*They were a very large group - seventeen altogether, some playing instruments I could not figure out. Some of which looked more like weapons than instruments. Some of them actually **were** weapons. As it turns out, grenade-launchers and other small artillery make for outstanding percussion instruments. More likely what really inspired me was the brew we were all drinking. It made me want to dance, and the round back of the guitar I played **forced** me to dance, as I played and sang.*

I don’t really play music so much as I beat it out of my guitars. I’ve been scolded a few times for being abusive to my instruments. I just tell the complainers that I practice with a new one until

*I’m sure it can take it. By the time I take it out in public, it’s either gotten used to the abuse, or it actually **likes** it. No matter, the thing is - if you have a roundback guitar, you gotta dance with it.*)

“Where Was I…?”

“Thank you, my friend,” Marduk said as he took the flagon from my hand and raised it to his lips. He took a couple of deep draws of the Revitalizing Brew, then set the flagon on the floor and shook his head again. Hesitantly at first, then more vigorously. He didn’t feel any pain this time, and his face broke into a big grin.

Most Immortals would not believe this if I told them, but when Marduk is truly happy and smiles, he’s actually very cute. Otherwise, he is ruggedly handsome, with a cold gaze that

makes him look like what he is - on the surface - a formidable Immortal one should best steer clear of, unless one has some business to discuss with him.

Otherwise, one should never do anything to attract his steely-blue eyes towards one. Just making eye contact with him has caused many Mortals' hearts to seize and the rest of them to drop dead. Seeing his cute grin completely changed my opinion of him, though, and I relaxed a little.

"I've come to offer my most sincere apologies," I hoped my voice didn't sound too whiny.

I cleared my throat and continued, "In my realm, we refer to that as a suckerpunch, and it's considered…a cowardly move."

Marduk didn't move. I mean, his body froze as I spoke. He was tense, like a tightly wound spring. I didn't want that coil to come unsprung on me. I sooo much didn't want that. Of course, Marduk dared not lash out in anger at the Mortal who knocked him out cold - in public, no less! - lest he start dancing again. I took a deep breath and continued.

"I've been in love with Eris since I was a mere child," I told him. My voice was warm with both affection for the Goddess, and regret for my transgression. "I knew it was sheer folly to tell her that a part of her was missing, that the part of her no one - not even herself - can control, has never been manifested, and I suggested she give birth to another daughter, who has no control over herself other than what she feels in the moment. Who doesn't concern herself with consequences, nor Other's opinions about what she does. Who not even time itself can bind."

Marduk made no effort to uncoil his fury in my direction. Instead, he listened attentively, tilted his head in contemplation, and furled his brow. He gave me his undivided attention. Not only did I feel like I had not put my life in danger by approaching and speaking to him, but I was actually quite happy to have done so.

"I flattered myself to think she heard my prayers, but then received what I imagined were signs that she approved of the idea…" Marduk picked up his flagon to drink some more, and I sat down nearby - just a bit out of his reach, which was quite a stretch. Who knew if the Immortals didn't absent-mindedly snatch up nearby Mortals and make a quick snack of them? I didn't.

Though I kept a wary eye on Marduk, I picked up my own beverage and drank some, too. As I swallowed, I saw Chloe pass through the banquet hall, issuing orders to some of the other servants.

"Chloe!" I called to her. She looked our way, then her knees nearly buckled, her lips quivered, and her eyes grew
huge, like she had just witnessed something terrifying. She made her way towards us quite uneasily. She looked very reluctant to either believe what she saw or to approach us. Or him, at least. The most powerful amongst the Ancients, you know.

"Could you fetch us a plate full of the wonderous-smelling food ya'll've laid out on the breakfast tables?"
(*Why? **Why** did I revert to my High Plains of Texas accent just then? Guess it just sounds friendly? Maybe
because I felt absolutely relaxed…like I was amongst family? Marduk seemed to actually be interested in what I had to say. This was going better than I could expect. Which kinda made me nervous.*)

We sat in an awkward silence for a few seconds, until Chloe returned. Three additional servants followed her, each carrying a huge plater, laden with plates overflowing with appetizing foods. The aroma was overwhelming, and my belly greeted their arrival with a growl. Chloe herself carried a tray encumbered with various hot beverages, as well as some fruit juices. And ice.

“Do you desire anything else, Gaian?” Chloe inquired. Getting no immediate response, and seeing my fascination with Marduk, she offered, “Like some of the ancient, exotic liquors from the cellar?”

“Oh, hell yeah!” I cheered. “How about some ancient Rye Whiskey; some very, very ancient Brandy; and some of the finest Tequila my darling Ninkasi has on-hand?”

“Limes and salt, too?” she asked.

“Chloe, I love you!” I said. “Yes, thank you!”

Chloe gave me an impish grin, lifted her shoulder to her chin as she partially turned and asked, “Wanna help me cut the limes?”

She did ***not*** have limes on her mind! Her pose at that moment was so invitingly seductive, I almost gave myself over to it, let her lead me away, and have her way with me. But…one shouldn’t carry on with the servants before one has consummated one’s marriage to two of the sexiest, most beautiful Goddesses alive. Ish. Are they alive, like I was at that time? Or…*(I found out, eventually…getting ahead of the story again…pardon me…)*

I motioned to Marduk with my drink and reminded her: “I’m having a conversation here.”

Her eyes grew round with fear, as she suddenly remembered Marduk was just an arm’s length away. Her knees knocked, and she adamantly refused to look his way. Then, she fled from our presence and disappeared into some swirling clouds.

Marduk had poured plates full of food over and emptied them onto a serving platter. He lifted it to his chin and poured the entire, heaping pile of food into his open mouth. Or tried to. Some of it tumbled down to the floor, some of it landed on his lap, some on his chest. He was completely unconcerned – he was hungry and wanted as much food in his mouth as he could manage to get in there.

I took a big bite from an omelet I’d taken from one of the platters overflowing with food. A Divine Omelet. I was reluctant to chew it up and swallow, as its flavor filled my entire Being with vigor and healthiness. Each chew was like a mouthgasm of deliciousness unlike anything I’d ever experienced from food before. Truly, I was in heaven. I continued chewing with tears forming in my eyes.

I’d just swallowed the first bite when Chloe returned with 3 bottles, 2 glasses, a pile of quartered limes and a dish filled with salt.

“Bhwandeh!” I ordered, my mouth again full of food. Only now, I eagerly munched it down and swallowed.

Chloe handed me a snifter full of the oldest, smoothest, strongest, sweetest Brandy I’ll ever drink. Before I sipped it, Marduk broke the silence in our conversation.

“I, too, have been in love with Eris for an eternity.” He all but whispered. I motioned for Chloe to put the beverage tray down between us and shooed her away. Then poured a glass full of Brandy for Marduk. He immediately snatched it up and downed it.

Just for shits and giggles, I refilled his snifter with Tequila, after I’d turned it upside-down to salt the rim, then righted it. Of course, I set a lime on the rim after filling the glass.

Marduk examined the glass, then put a particularly salty part of the rim to his lips and licked the lime into his mouth. And took a deep draw of very, very strong tequila.

His eyes lit up, he shrugged his shoulders, held the drink above his head, and let out a growl.

“That’s fine tequila!” he said before setting the drink down to reach for another platter full of food.

“Actually,” he explained while dumping plate after plate of food onto the serving platter, “I fell in love with Tiamat, just as I destroyed her. The look on her face…I’ll never forget it.” I was nervously sipping at the Brandy while he busied himself with his breakfast. It went fast, so I helped myself to some Tequila.

His eyes watered. He wasn’t going to cry, but his eyes did water. I could scarcely believe my senses. So, not only had I sucker-punched the Mightiest of All the Immortals, he was also a romantic rival. For the mother of my Goddess daughter. I sucked down a big gulp of Tequila too smooth to burn, but strong enough to almost choke me. I needed more energy, so I turned my attention back to the food.

As I shoveled more Divine Omelet into my mouth, Marduk continued:

“…when I approached her, she sent her messenger out to greet me. I was sent – starfire! I was ***created*** – to destroy her, not engage with her, so I destroyed him and turned to do the same with her.” He gulped down a huge portion of the food on the serving platter. He set it beside himself and took another quaff of the Tequila. I was glad to notice he wasn’t trying to start a drinking contest. His second draw on the Tequila was a modest one, even for a mortal like me.

Intrigued by his story, and in love with the Tequila, I took a lick of the rim and a sip from the tumbler. Other than a deeply felt concern for the well-being of my mortal body, I was fairly at ease, and the liquor was helping me to relax.

“She fled, and set many of her minions against me. They were but a trifle, so I soon came bearing down upon her again. And her expression!” Marduk took another draw from his Tequila. Much more than the previous one.

“She looked…hurt…emotionally…there were tears forming in her eyes. She actually attacked first, a fierce strike that nearly knocked me off my feet. But, she was no match for me, not when she was having to deal with some emotions I had somehow triggered in her.”

“It took a long while to understand,” he continued, after finishing off the last of his Tequila. “but it finally dawned on me that she was impressed with me. Very likely, we were two of the most powerful Beings to have ever existed. What a pair we could have made!”

I was aghast. Tiamat and Marduk as a couple! No one could have stood against them - no force, no army…nothing in all the known universe could have challenged them, and they could have ruled over all with iron fists. As I pondered this, I actually made a fist around a slice of lime, which I drained into my glass before I took a deep drink.

I didn't realize it, but Marduk was also making a fist. He saw me doing likewise and burst into laughter, then swatted me on the shoulder.

"Precisely!" he exclaimed, "we would have held everything and everyone right in our hands, to do with as we pleased!" He laughed what can only be described as a diabolical cackle, then shook his hand to unfist it and reach for more food. I poured a good measure of Rye into his empty glass.

"I'm so glad that never happened – the two of us becoming united." He took a careful sip of the Rye, then held up the glass to inspect it further. "Well!" he said. "This is wonderful! This is the Rye, I take it?" and for the first time, we made eye contact.

I hoped he didn't notice me cringe when he looked my way.

"Yes, it is!" I said. "It was a favorite in the past, but by my time, it'd become hard to find." I took another, largish drink of the Tequila – I was eager to be done with it, so as to move on to the Rye which had so impressed my drinking buddy. Marduk, my drinking buddy. I almost laughed at the thought.

"No matter how long I live, I'll never figure out things Mortals do." Marduk laughed aloud then, and pounded me on the back. Affectionately. If there had been violent intent behind that swat, he'd've been dancing by now.

Oh, I'm so glad he was sitting on the side of me that hadn't been broken to bits on Mt. Tabor. I was certain that swat could've rebroken all the ribs I'd broken back then, and maybe even knocked the pieces deep into various internal organs. I could've died in a matter of seconds.

He wasn't, though, and I swear - I felt and heard some electric engines rev up when his palm slapped my back. Lights were suddenly lit on the gizmos around my wrists. Apparently, there is some sort of energy field around me that helps to repel attacks. The swat didn't really feel so mighty as I imagined it would. So, the protection afforded by these devices can judge the mood and allow contact made with merry intent? Intelligent technology? Sorta like the swirling clouds? I wasn't sure I liked what I was getting myself into with this crowd.

"…and Eris…?" I encouraged Marduk to fill me in about his feelings for the mother of my Goddess daughter - and supposedly one of my current spouses – who he had actually created when he attacked Tiamat.

"Eris…" Marduk feigned attention to his still raised glass, then downed the remnants in one huge gulp, which he swished around in his mouth before he swallowed. He let out a satisfied sigh.

"Eris is all the most feminine aspects of Tiamat, with the exception of nurturing." He set the glass down and reached for the Brandy for a refill. "She is devious, cunning, seductive, lovely - so, so sexy…" his voice trailed off.

"She's the sexiest, most beautiful female anything! Ever!" I offered in summation.

"**Yes!**" he almost roared. He moved his refilled glass towards me, expectantly. I raised mine as well, and they made a pleasant "clink" when they met.

"To the sexiest, most beautiful female anything, ever: Eris!" he did actually roar, as he stood up beside me and raised his glass high above his head, before he drained it.

That was too much for some of the guests, who dropped their beverages and fainted. For the entire time Marduk and I drank and talked to one another, all eyes were upon us. I'm certain bets were placed on how long I had to live. Or to dwell amongst them. Something like that. I'm still unsure about what it means to be alive, after meeting that crowd.

A confused mumbling emanated from the still-conscious revelers.

"**To Eris!**" I shouted as I leapt to my feet and finished my tumbler of Tequila.

"To the sexiest, most beautiful female anything, ever - Eris!" the crowd roared, and the crash of their flagons and goblets as they hit the ground seconds later was palpable in the floor, which shook slightly, as if it had been compelled to move by a small earthquake.

In the days that followed, Marduk graciously credited me with the description of my beloved. Had a lot of explaining to do to his wife - who *is* a Fertility Goddess, after all. (*In Mortal terms, these types are known as "nymphomaniacs." FYI.*)

After the commotion had ebbed somewhat, Marduk grabbed the bottle of Rye out of my hand – I had just refilled my glass. "I'm taking this for later. I don't know when I've enjoyed a drink so much. Thank you!"

He turned to walk away, then said over his shoulder, "I've never shared my feelings for Tiamat and Eris. Thank you again, for the conversation. It's quite refreshing to get these feelings out in the open. I hope to speak with you again, when there are fewer distractions."

He said this as he approached an extra-ordinarily beautiful woman, who had come into the Grand Hall several times throughout the night and stood with arms crossed, a very beffudled look on her face at the sight of Marduk's dancing.

Just now, as he approached her, she uncrossed her arms, gave Marduk a huge, welcoming smile, and took him by one of his arms. This had to be Marduk's human wife. I forget her name, but maybe I should look it up before meeting with my drinking buddy again.

Me and Marduk – confidential friends. And drinking buddies! I shook my head and took a sip of the Rye.

"*Ai-yi-yi!*" I thought. "This is getting weirder by the second."

Eris and Ninkasi

Eris lay across Ninkasi's bed, a peaceful smile on her face. Ninkasi lay with her head at rest on Eris' tummy, one hand upon Eris' shoulder, so as to enable her to stroke her wife's cheek with her fingertips. Her other hand rested on one of Eris's thighs.

"Darling," the Chaos Goddess said, "can you show me a display of Gaian punching out Marduk? I really didn't get a good look at our Mortal Champion."

"Certainly, dear," Ninkasi answered. "We would like to see a replay of Gaian punching out Marduk, clouds!"

The clouds parted and in the space created as they did, images from earlier in the day flashed by until Marduk made his criticism of Eris's gown.

"Stop there!" the Goddess of Brewing insisted.

"That's a good view of him!" she explained to her spouse. "He's standing just to the right of Marduk," she pointed, "See, Marduk's the tall one, behind the God of Thunder? And the Nightmare God?

"Gaian's the cute one."

"Well," Eris took a second to evaluate the imagery. "He *is* cute."

(*Cute. My greatest fear is to be remembered as "the Cute One." It's been a curse all my life, cuteness. And if I try to do anything - absolutely* ***anything*** *– to try to downplay the cuteness, or project a different look, I'd actually be* ***cuter****. There are times when I decide to go with it and I try to enhance the cuteness. It's usually too much. Really, really hot women hit on me when I do. And I find a way to drop the ball, so to speak, every time. It's a curse, I tell you. A cute curse. I…just don't even know…*)

"Now, proceed from that moment, in slow motion, like 1/5th actual speed," Ninkasi instructed the clouds. When Marduk's head snapped backwards, he fell over, and finally hit the ground, the Goddesses laughed and laughed. Then the quiet returned.

Ninkasi turned her head to tug at one of Eris's nipples with her lips and kiss it. Eris squirmed with delight.

Ninkasi was too happily content to go further, so she turned her head away from Eris's lovely, round breast, just as a roar from the Grand Hall proclaimed **"To the sexist, most beautiful female anything, ever – Eris!"** followed by a ground-shaking rumble of flagons and goblets striking the floor.

"My!" Ninkasi commented, "you certainly have become popular all of a sudden!"

"I suspect Gaian has something to do with that," the Goddess of Chaos speculated.

They lay in silence until Ninkasi offered "He *is* something special, isn't he?"

She sat upright for a second, thought the better of it, and settled down on top of her spouse - Ninkasi's head at rest between Eris's breasts.

"I've actually been aware of him for a little while," Ninkasi confessed to her spouse. "He's been offering little prayers of thanks when he drinks beer." She thought for a few more seconds, as she nuzzled further into Eris's embrace. "He drinks fairly frequently – it seems to make him jolly!"

Eris thought for a little while before she asked, "You *do* know I have a child by him?" She pushed herself upright with an elbow.

"I suppose I should say we'll have a child together at some point," she attempted to clarify. "It's complicated."

Ninkasi took a second to compose her thoughts as her head slid into Eris's lap. Very fragrant lap, I might add. The aroma was almost enough to cause Ninkasi to forget about anything else but shoving her face into the source of that scent and having a gluttonous taste of it. They had things to discuss, though, so she explained to her spouse: "I don't try to pry into your affairs when you disappear on me." Ninkasi pushed herself up onto one of her elbows as well. She was now face-to-face with her beloved wife.

"He's venerated me for almost his entire life." She told Ninkasi. "So few Mortals remember us these days, his prayers, thoughts, and emotions touched me far beyond his ability to express them.

"And many of those who *do* offer me prayers and such think of me as some sort of vile demoness." Eris shivered
with revulsion. "So, I make sure to take that form when I respond to their supplications. The horrible things they ask my blessings for – well…in the end, I make certain they feel the pain they desired to bring into their world."

Eris absent-mindedly leaned over to kiss Ninkasi's forehead. "Gaian told me there was part of me missing. He was sort of vague on what he meant, but after a while he convinced me that the part of Tiamat he felt was missing was the part that cannot be bound, not by anything nor anyone. Not even by time. I agreed, so I decided to have a child, according to his desire."

Ninkasi was totally enraptured with Eris's narrative. She reached out a hand to cup Eris's cheek and stroke it with
her thumb. "Eris!" she chided. "Why have you hidden this away from me?" Ninkasi didn't want her wife to think
she was angry or disappointed with her. If anything, the expression on her face would lead one to believe she was concerned that someone she had strong feelings about would keep such a thing to herself.

"Well," Eris explained, "**she** asked not to come into our minds until her father was ready to meet her." Ninkasi looked perplexed, but Eris could only shrug her shoulders. "Our daughter is rather…I don't know how to explain her…She cannot be ruled, not even by time." Eris looked off into the distance of Ninkasi's bed chamber. "She's always existed, but she wasn't even *conceived* of until I accepted her father's proposal, which wasn't so long ago, according to our way of reckoning time."

"But," she added in a more somber tone, "she should have arrived *here*, by now. At least, that's how I reckoned things."

As if on cue, a voice echoed through Ninkasi's Sacred Hall, "Introducing the Mistress of Mercy, Savanah – an Aspect of Ki, the Goddess who **is** the Primordial Source of All Things Living!"

Both of the Goddesses in Ninkasi's bed chamber were immediately let down by the announcement.

Chloe entered the chamber and took a knee. "My lady," she said, "you requested to meet with Savannah upon her arrival. Shall I summon her?"

"Yes," Ninkasi said, and began to gather her clothing around herself, so as to be presentable to an aspect of the most powerful Goddess, Ki – the Embodiment of Life Itself. Or at least, of life as it was known to the Immortals and Mortals who revered and depended upon her for sustenance. It had been ages since the last time Ki came to visit, even in part.

Eris was not in the habit of meeting and chatting with other Primordial Beings – like she used to be, Tiamat - nor their Aspects. She quickly grabbed up her own clothing and made her way into a bank of clouds.

"I'd like to speak more of my latest daughter, but it can wait until after I have a bath." She blew a quick kiss towards her beloved wife and stepped into those freakin' clouds. She emerged from them into a clearing in the midst of twisted trees and thick undergrowth, which covered a carpet of thick moss, clover, and grass. A bubbling spring fed a pool on one side, across from a very inviting-looking bed.

"Are you here at last, Autonomia?" Eris's voice quivered as she asked.

"MOM!" a voice from another bank of clouds responded. "Oh, my dear Mother! I could *never* imagine you to be so *beautiful*!"

Eris turned towards the voice to see one of the cutest maidens she had ever beheld emerge from the clouds. Who proceeded to trot over and throw her arms around the Goddess of Chaos.

Autonomia had the appearance of a young woman in her prime. She had smile lines in her face which did nothing to make her look older than she was, but attested to the fact that she smiled a lot. Autonomia is likely the merriest, happiest being to have ever manifested.

As Goddess of the Everywhen, she is frighteningly powerful. No one had figured that out before she first appeared. On the other hand…

But…she hasn’t been born yet!!!

“**Chloe!**” I shouted into the clouds as I finished off my drink. Marduk made off with the rest of the smoothest, most delicious Rye Whiskey I’d ever tasted.

She immediately appeared before me and took a knee. Which was totally uncalled for, if you had asked me at the time.

“Yes, Gaian!” she said as she puffed to catch her breath.

“Darlin’,” I explained to her, “I don’t know what orders you are under, or what the proper protocol is for such things, but I *feel* like my daughter is present, and I very much would enjoy meeting her.”

Chloe remained where she was. “So, if you don’t mind, could you please escort me to wherever she is…?”

Chloe still didn’t move.

“Nowish, if you please?” I asked.

She began to move then, and stood upright to thrust her more-than-ample boobs aloft. I was well impressed with the sight, let me tell you.

“There are no standing orders regarding you and your daughter, therefor I am obliged to fulfill your request.” She informed me. “She is in her guest grotto, with her mother and your wife, Eris. This is also their first meeting. You ***may*** want to put your meeting with them off until later…?” she hinted at me.

“Or I *may* not,” I demanded, not a little miffed with her attitude. Insolent servant! Nonetheless, my eyes were steadfastly affixed to the sight of Chloe’s bouncing cleavage, so magnificent a sight as they were.

“Then, just GO!” she said. “I’m busy at the moment.”

She turned to walk back into the clouds, then thought the better of it. “You can go anywhere you desire just by asking aloud. The clouds will take you there.”

“I would like to be announced – introduced, as it were – before I enter their presence. I’m not sure they know me by sight as of yet,” I explained to the servant I would have rather smacked on the butt, due to her insolence. NOT because said butt looked so invitingly round and soft, it almost **pled** to be slapped.

Chloe looked pained. She thought for a second. “Very well,” she said after a second or so of contemplation. “You ARE her father, after all…?” Her tone suggested she doubted Autonomia’s parentage. Or at least my part in it. I also got the feeling she was familiar enough with my daughter to have a strong opinion about who she is and what she would want in the current circumstances. But the excitement that I was about to meet both my Goddess daughter and her mother for the first time thrilled me enough to overlook any nuances Chloe’s demeanor might suggest.

“Okay, clouds,” I said, “do your thing, and bring me another decanter full of the oldest Rye Whiskey in the cellar.” Clouds descended from the ceiling to my feet. As I stepped into them, I added “And three glasses - with some ice, cheese and crackers on the side.” I stopped halfway in to add “…and some caviar, if there is some available.”

Zoe brushed me aside as she strode out of the clouds and into Autonomia’s bed chamber. Or bedroom Grotto. She carried a tray with everything I requested on it, set it down on a table next to the bed, turned sharply, and left.

There they were – Eris – the sexiest, most beautiful female anything, ever! – and our daughter – the cutest, curviest babe anyone’s ever seen. Well, not quite as curvy as Ninkasi, but… nevermind. She *is* my daughter, after all.

Her arms were around my neck before I really had a good look at her. “*Pops!*” she screeched as she wrapped her arms around my neck and shoulders. “Look at you!” she held me out at arm’s length. I could see tears welling up in her eyes. My eyes did likewise. Eris sat on the edge of the bed and smiled approvingly. She almost laughed, she was so delighted at the sight of our daughter embracing me for what I thought was the first time.

Ninkasi and Savannah

Chloe escorted Savannah into Ninkasi's bed chamber and left without a word. Savannah was scarcely dressed for a semi-formal occasion, like Ninkasi's annual Harvest Banquet. To be completely honest, she was scarcely dressed, period.

Savannah lived up to her name: Her skin the color of golden sand, her hair the color of tall grass in Autumn. Her eyes are blue like a clear sky with scarcely any moisture to mention. Most disturbing to Ninkasi when they first met, though, was…

"Darling," Ninkasi said as she crossed the floor to embrace this newly-minted Aspect of Ki. "you're but a child!"

Aspects aren't really considered full-fledged Gods and Goddesses. Not until they've proven themselves worthy by performing some menial task no one really enjoyed doing. Or, few really enjoyed doing. Ninkasi has high standards, you know. She expects guests at her Grand Hall to be ready to take their place amongst the Immortals. None of that "I'll take care of it later" stuff for her!

"I've done my 6 years as the Reaper," Savannah informed her hostess, "and I'm *more* than ready to party."

Savannah let out a big sigh as she collapsed onto Ninkasi's bed. She landed on her back, arms outstretched. "I've had more than enough of the dead, too. They're so *needy!*"

"Darling," Ninkasi said, appraising Savannah's clothing. Or what she was attempting to pass off as her clothing. She scarcely had anything covered by the few scraps of cloth which lay haphazardly in strategic places. "The way you're dressed, people might take you for a servant, or a concubine!"

"What's a concubine?" Savannah inquired as she twitched her nose a bit, before flipping over to bury her face in the blankets and sheets Ninkasi and her spouse had ruffled just minutes ago.

"A sex slave!" Ninkasi told her, while she reminded herself to have the servants change the bedding before she
entertained other guests in her private chamber. "Or, more precisely," she corrected herself, "a concubine is a
lover one purchases at a slave auction. Or brothel."

“Well,” Savannah said and turned her face a bit more towards the Goddess of Brewing. “That sounds fine to me! This is supposed to be a party, isn’t it?” Savannah was now very busy with an examination of the various fragrances she encountered on Ninkasi’s bed. Which the Brewing Goddess found to be very rude of her.

This was not going any way she thought it might, and she definitely needed to get some clothes on this…teenager…before the others had a look at her. For the child’s sake.

“Listen, Savannah,” she instructed, “you don’t want to be stereotyped as a raging slut from the get-go. People will expect that from you for a million years. It gets old after a while, believe you me!”

“You were a raging slut for a while?” At least Ninkasi had her attention now, she thought.

“No, darling – I married one.” Ninkasi informed her guest. “Eris and Nanaya have the Divine Slut roles nailed down for good!”

“And just how OLD are they?” Savannah asked, as she held a particularly compelling bit of bedding up to her nose.

Ninkasi had just about had enough of this…this…Aspect for the time being. She felt a headache coming on.

Just then, I walked in on them. Purely unintentionally, mind you.

Autonomia, her mother, and I chatted briefly, when all of a sudden, our daughter took me by the arm and began to escort me into the clouds. I scarcely had time to snatch up the decanter of Rye before she explained; “Pops, there are girl things I need to discuss with Mom, so why don’t you go and make the acquaintance of your concubine?”

I hadn’t even consummated my marriage to the two new wives yet, and here was my daughter – my DAUGHTER! – telling me to fuck off, in a very kind, literal, and insistent way. With a woman who was a total stranger to me at that point.

Autonomia gave me a shove, and I found myself entering Ninkasi’s bed chamber. The Goddess of Brewing was chatting with a very pretty, very blonde, very young woman. She had freckles on her cheeks and shoulders.

“Freakin’ fireballs!” the youngster cried as she sprang upright, onto her knees, in the middle of Ninkasi’s bed. She squirmed a bit, with both of her hands tucked into her crotch, as if she had a leak that needed attending. “He’s so CUTE!”

(***Again****, with the “cute” thing!*

I didn’t know it at the time, but when one is in the presence of a group of the Ancients, and they throw compliments one’s way, one then attains a little bit more of the attribute which elicited the compliments. Of course, when one leaves their company, the enhanced attributes also leave. ***UNLESS*** *there have been an overwhelming number of them. In such a case – say a lady has been described as “cute” throughout the evening, a lot. Some “cute” attributes will have become permanently and subtly cuter. Like her facial features will become a bit more delicate. Her smile a bit more sparkly. Her dimples a bit more pronounced.*

I didn't even know about such things at this point. Though I HAD figured out some of the effects of the special brew Ninkasi had me drink as I made my entrance. One of the effects I figured out was, I could hear any remark being made about me, anywhere in the Grand Hall. "Mortal" and "cute" were vying for the Most Overheard Remark crown. Other things were on my mind, so I never checked my appearance. I must have been very, very cute by the time I met Savannah. I was already under a glamor spell – Zoe had prodded me to be taller when I first arrived – so at least the enhanced cuteness would be fleeting this time around. For the most part. I decided to keep the piercings. You don't have to tell me – I know full well I'm vain. Oh, so well do I know. After all, I had not only proposed to a Goddess that she have another daughter, but afterwards flattered myself into the belief I had fathered said daughter – more than conceptually.)

Savannah Doesn't Like Waiting

Right! Back to the story…

Now Ninkasi was certain a headache had its sights set on her. It happens every year – unforeseen circumstances rear their nasty little heads and cause her unnecessary stress. She rubbed the bridge of her nose. Not that she didn't think of me as cute, mind you, it's just – our wife is very fragrant. If you take my meaning. Pheromones a go-go, one might say. As for Savannah, she was much the same, only 19. Do I have to spell it out? 9-t.e.e.n. And, it was very clear to Ninkasi just how aroused Savannah was *before* I made my uncannily timed entrance into her bed chamber.

Savannah squealed when she said "…cute." I could genuinely feel myself become a bit cuter. I felt somewhat trapped, though - I had intruded upon Ninkasi and her guest and was more than a little embarrassed. I tried to mumble an apology while the Goddess of Brewing massaged herself between the eyes. She appeared to be in pain. She was trying to figure out a way to keep both Savannah and I out of her hair – so to speak - until she felt up to entertaining us on her own terms. She felt she had no choice but to…

Before I could collect my wits, she rolled those too big, too amber eyes to the back of her head and made a "shoo"ing motion towards me, as she faced Savannah, who turned her face towards our hostess, her huge blue eyes round with astonishment. "Really?" she gasped.

Ninkasi nodded towards me and repeated the "shoo"ing motion.

"Yeeeesss!" she said while letting out a longish sigh. "Go ahead, but try…"

Savannah made a flying tackle on me with enough force to knock me off my feet, right out of Ninkasi's bed chamber, and all the way into the Everywhen, where her own Sacred Hall was located at the time. I suppose the clouds had something to do with that, too. They're weird.

We landed in a huge pile of pillows. The pretty, young, blonde babe was tugging at my shirt with one hand, while she stripped off her entire outfit with the other. Which took surprisingly little effort. The one hand was still busy with my shirt when the other came free and joined the struggle.

I could see the writing on the wall – it read "***Savannah – Reap No More!***" But, more importantly, I could judge the mood in the room: we were going to have sex, this youngster and I, so I had better get onboard and get on with it. As she ripped my shirt open, my hands worked valiantly to save my pants from a similar fate, while I kicked my boots off, into a distant corner, followed quickly by the pants.

All the while, she covered my face with kisses, which came in rapid succession, across the area adjacent to and including my lips. I partially opened my mouth, grabbed her by the back of her head and tried to shove my tongue down her throat. Her mouth tasted like warm honey. We simultaneously let out little moans. Mine was more of a "yummy" sound, while hers was more like "mmmm." The sound I made lilted higher, while the one she made lilted lower. Even though her eyes were closed, they fluttered behind their respective lids. As one could well imagine, I was fully erect by this time, and the babe – still unknown to me at this point – was desperately trying to force herself onto me.

I almost ordered her to "Calm the fuck down," but 2 things hit me at the same time to prevent it:

1) I reined in my senses enough to realize that was **NOT** what I really wanted, and
2) **ALL** the psychedelics I had eaten the previous day and overnight.

My mood had gone from awkward discomfort to full arousal to tripping balls to being absolutely giddy in less than 10 seconds. I almost giggled at the thought that, if anyone were going to calm this fuck down, it would be ME! I **had** dealt successfully with the kissing, after all.

I lowered my hands and pushed them behind her sweet, round buttocks so as to allow my fingers to glide between her thighs. I put them together and found her labia for just long enough to spread the lips apart.

She was still gyrating her hips like a rotary engine when I pushed myself up with my knees to lift her off the pillows, and began to enter her. She caught the gist of what was going on, and wrapped her legs around my waist. My hands had drifted down to the bottom of her thighs, so I held her there while I sank myself completely into her. We were still lip-locked, but she gave a little growl. And I immediately came.

She squealed when she felt me jump inside her. I have to admit – I like the squealing. So much.

Our lips parted, but not our faces. They were plastered against one another, cheek-to-cheek.

I turned my face, kissed her some more and laid her down. Her feet were locked behind my back. Her strong, lean arms hugged me tightly around the lower part of my ribs. As I let my weight come to rest upon her, I kissed her deeply, slowly, for a long, long time. The way I like it, especially whilst in the midst of a prolonged orgasm.

She tugged her head to the side, just enough to get me out of her face while she struggled to catch her breath. Her chest heaved. Quite an impressive sight. Her breasts were perfectly round, as if someone had inserted grapefruits beneath her skin.

At first glance, I thought her skin might be a little on the dry side, but I was wrong. She was soft and warm, her skin smooth and the color of honey.

I generally don't get along so well with blondes. We, on the other hand, got on very well. For the next six hours or so.

"…not to wear him out, dear." Ninkasi said as the clouds swallowed us up in her chamber and Savannah's sandals clattered to the floor.

"Chloe, bring me a pitcher of the Revitalizing Brew." She ordered. Then added, "Dammit!"

Six Hours (or so) Later

"Oh!" Savannah pleaded, "Don't get up!"

"Darlin'," I explained, "I'm an old man, and you're going to kill me if I don't take a break."

"You're no fun!" she exclaimed. I had no choice. I rolled back onto my side, extended both arms and began to tickle her, mercilessly. She asked for it.

"No fun? Babe, it was just past high noon when we started."

As stars twinkled beyond her bedroom window, I grabbed one of the feet she raised to playfully kick me in the face, and raked my teeth along the bottom of the foot's arch. She squealed loudly and tried to jerk her foot free of my grip. My tickle attack was much too strong for her, though, so she could do little but squirm, squeal, toss, and turn. She made an absolute wreck of the pillows we lay amongst.

I eventually relented and fell onto my back to concentrate on breathing. "My name's Gaian," I huffed.

She reached a hand over to me. "So pleased to meet you, Gaian," she said through a huge smile. I reached up to shake her hand. "I'm your concubine, Savannah."

“Since when do I have a concubine?” I demanded. “I still have two wives to…you know…marry.” She started to laugh.

“Consider me a gift.” She suggested as she flopped over, on top of me. “Or…I dunno…can concubines volunteer?”

“I’m not sure that’s how it works,” I informed her. “Truth be told,” I said as I ran my hands along her sides while she straddled my hips, “I’m not sure of a lot of things these days.”

“I thought you needed to take a break!” she teased as she discovered evidence I was well on my way to recovery from the day’s first round. I sat upright to embrace her as I entered her again.

“Darlin’,” I told her “do NOT underestimate yourself.” She squealed again.

Autonomia and the Everywhen

Back in Autonomia’s grotto bed chamber, she and her mother laid across her bed, holding hands, and also holding glasses of wine with their free hands.

Eris was full of questions, but rather than let out a barrage of words, she was content to enjoy her daughter’s presence. There was no doubt this was her daughter, but for the life of her…

“I don’t seem to recall giving birth to you, dear,” she pondered aloud.

“Oh,” our presumed child replied, “that’s because you haven’t. Yet.”

Autonomia takes some getting used to. She exists in the Everywhen. Unbound by time, she has always existed, and always will – unless she decides she’s had enough and goes on to do something else. Which is intriguing to me. But, here she was, meeting with her mother for the first time, as a full-grown, young adult woman. Before she was conceived. I suppose she needed to prepare us somewhat. The Everywhen is a tough concept to chew, much less swallow.

Autonomia cannot be bound by time, and is aware of every second that could ever exist. She is aware of possibilities that could *potentially* exist. Her realm is therefor an infinity of infinite possibilities. And she sees them all.

She can exist in any of these possible realities at will, but for the most part, she dances through the moments, searching for ones she likes. Her consciousness is usually spread out amongst many, many possible moments, on the lookout for interesting possibilities to develop, so as to nudge them along, towards an outcome she enjoys. If things don't turn out in a manner that pleases her, she can always go back and try again.

And – believe me – you do NOT want to make her angry. If she gets angry enough, she'll track your family's history back to a very vulnerable moment and just do away with the part that led to your birth.

It takes a lot of concentration for her to manifest somewhen well enough to be physically present. She oftentimes takes a partial presence somewhen if she has someone on her mind, or feels like something needs her attention. If one is alert enough and familiar with her, one can sense her presence, even when it is very slight. I did when she entered her guest grotto at Ninkasi's place, for instance.

She's a party girl – like her mother. She really enjoys throwing together festivals, so she can dance for days on end. If one desires to consult with her or otherwise catch her attention, the best thing to do is think of her while dancing. It'll take a while, but if one can keep at it for a couple of hours, one will eventually be dancing beside her. And she will have a new friend to spoil. She does like to spoil new friends. Pulls miracles out of the blue just to see how one will respond. One should try to put the brakes on such behavior on her part, before she makes a mess of things and her attention wanders off, somewhen else.

That happens most often when she has a pet. She particularly likes puppies, because they tend to want to investigate just about everything, and she merrily follows along. Puppies and the Everywhen can be quite a charming combination. Until…SQUIRREL! Then, Autonomia might disappear at some crucial point in some place's history, after she's jumbled the players around a bit, or changed the order things occurred in the first time around, or pulled someone from a distant historical moment to another to see if that person could straighten out a particular problem she saw coming. Most people would consider such episodes in their lives to be either visions or dreams. Or fantasies, if one can fantasize with the best of them.

Sometimes, her inattention to details – an attribute I am sad to admit she inherited from me – causes misfortune and hardship for generations in the places she so glibly abandons. She has eternities to go back and make amends, and she does, eventually – or she sends one of her friends in the Everywhen to handle it for her. She's better than anyone at righting generational turmoil. She can make it all go away, almost without effort. Others who try…well…let's not get too far ahead of the story at this point…

She is powerful beyond anyone's understanding, even hers. It's why she has her own domain. Good thing she's a dancer, a Festival Goddess, and just wants to have a good time, or many, many Beings would suffer. The wars that could result if she were the bossy type – they could rupture time and space themselves.

I'm getting ahead of the story again (and so is she) but there are things one needs to know about Autonomia in order for the rest of this tale to make any sort of sense.

In addition to what I've mentioned above, Autonomia is a woman, and she has desires, biases, needs, and wants, just like any other Being. And sometimes, no matter how much she tries, no matter how many tactics she employs, some things just will not work out in any way she desires. Which drives her crazy. Seriously. She goes insane and does things very unlike her usual self. We – those of us who love her – have to intervene. Sometimes we have to go to war with her. And she is a formidable opponent. She cannot be defeated in hand-to-hand combat.

She can live through every possible movement one could make against her and counteract it. Effortlessly. She knows what you are going to do before you do it. There are ways around that, but it's almost impossible. Spontaneity is her downfall. Unpremeditated, spontaneous action can catch her off-guard. The novelty of what follows is what will catch her attention, and help her regain her senses. She *is* a sweetheart underneath it all, and once her concentration has been broken and she stands in wonder of an unforeseen moment, she usually breaks down in tears and disperses. And pulls herself together, while her friends and lovers put things right again – if it's at all possible. Otherwise, things fester until she returns to put them right herself.

She can really make a mess out of realities. Of course, there are always unintended consequences to just about anything one does, and Autonomia can go back and "fix" things as often as she desires. Usually for the better.

She does have a temper, when someone tries to tell her what to do. She generally runs to her sister, Dysnomia, when some authority tries to make her follow their laws. Dysnomia is also known as "the Slaughterer." So – problem solved! Dysnomia will promptly destroy any and everything to do with said authority. And if there are armies standing in her way, so much the better. Just as Autonomia loves to dance, Dysnomia loves to battle, and is happiest when she and her horse are covered in the blood, bits of internal organs, flesh, and other nasty remnants of the offensive entities who dared to tell her baby sister what she could or could not do.

Autonomia will sometimes ride into battle alongside her sis. She'll perform acrobatics on horseback, while she rampages through the enemy's ranks and leaves a trail of devastation in her wake. They both ride into battle naked. And Autonomia is always unarmed.

I could go on and on, but Autonomia's attributes and adventures will be revealed in due time.

One thing I should mention here is that there are beings which dwell exclusively in the Everywhen. They can be difficult to detect at times, because they are usually dispersed over a period of time. For example, imagine one is taking a long road trip. The denizen of the everywhen can focus on the end of the journey and pay scant attention to the actual trip. They are "present" when and where their consciousness is most concentrated. If one were to accompany this denizen on the trip, the Everywhen being would seem to fade, possibly until one could no longer detect it. It would still be there, mind you, just not *all* there. Does this make sense? It doesn't have to, really. It's just something that happens.

The Mistress of Mercy

Even after two weeks of cavorting with Savannah, she was still unwilling to understand or care if I had other things, places, and Beings on my mind, and needed to do something or another about my two wives.

Savannah's bed chamber is a convoluted mish-mash of stuffed animals – plushtoy depictions of herself in various sizes, splattered with red. There's a large painting of her which covers most

of one wall. In the painting, she has a determined look on her face, while explosions happen all around her, bullets whiz by – and through – her, and Beings collapse at her feet. She's covered in blood, and her face is partially obscured by dried blood, which glistens here and there where fresh blood has fallen. She carries a large scythe – a reaper's usual tool of trade. Her clothes are ragged and torn. Much of the flesh they would usually hide is visible. She would look kinda hot, except for the expression on her face – like she's seen way too much carnage and death for one day, and just needs to get on with her job until all the reaping is done. Also, the blood. So much blood.

Trailing off into the distance, away towards the horizon and up into the clouds are a multitude of less colorful Beings, tagging along behind her. Most of them expect her to tell them where to go or what to do.

She has no responsibility to guide them – it's their choice what to do and where to go next. Most of them have no clue as to any sort of afterlife, just vague notions and odd bits of folklore and religions they never really believed. Some of them will have evolved enough to go on to a higher realm and will just float away, while other ghosts transform into something else. The Reaper is not involved with this process, other than to make sure the souls have been severed from their previous lives. After that, they are free to go where they choose. Most of them go back for another round in the realm they are already familiar with. Some head toward a gathering of like-minded souls to create the "afterlife" they expected. Some wander around for a bit, to check out all the dazzling variety life has taken form in throughout the universe, and take a liking to something they find. Then – off they go to incarnate there.

This "afterlife" concept actually gets in the way of an evolving soul. It's all life, after all. The "before" and "after" are just things that happen. Over and over…until one has outgrown one realm and is ready to leave and experience something much different. It takes a lot of letting go to get to that point. Some folks just ain't got it in them to let go and face the unknown. And they follow the reaper around until they just can't take the constant influx of new souls, then turn and go back to where they came from.

That used to make Savannah sad, and now and then, she'd engage one of the lost souls in conversation. Big mistake. She'd get an earful of excuses, shreds of garbled Sacred Writ, and longings to be with a lost loved one, who the ghost expects her to remember and know how to locate. In the end, her end of the conversation would leave the ghost confused or angry, and it would wander away in a fit of rage - or a flood of tears.

Surprisingly enough, the younger kids would be curious and not as upset about leaving the familiarity of their previous lives, and ready to explore. If they tagged along with the Reaper, they would often give playful commentary about what was happening around them, or make jokes about how certain ghosts appeared. And pull practical jokes on the ones who looked more confused than the others. Now, you'd think that would be cruel, but in almost every instance, their joking around would actually help the wanderers come to grips with their experiences. It could be quite charming, at the right moment.

But, who has time for charm, when one has 450,000 souls left to reap in a day? Especially if a few of them just don't want to go? That's what the scythe is for. The Reaper just takes a swing, cuts them loose, and the playful types - like Savannah - try to give the soul a good, solid whack with the scythe's handle, and send it soaring off into the distance. This kinda disturbs the other souls, and they shuffle back and forth on their imagined feet and try to ignore one another for a few seconds. What *really* disturbs them, though, is Savannah appraising the swat she just delivered, either by laughing aloud, letting out a "wheeeeew!" or an "All-RIGHT!" Many sad souls would turn and shuffle away at that point.

Savannah's bed chamber was her refuge from work and all it took from her. She found out she'd made her way into the folklore of some cultures – thus the cute little figurines of a little blonde girl on a tricycle, covered in blood and wearing a huge smile. And the drawings of a cute little girl, covered in blood, holding an overly-large scythe behind her back with both hands. Same toothy smile – or maybe with a tooth missing – and a caption which reads "I've come to take your soul!" Or "Guess what? You're **DEAD!**" Or "I'm just going to help myself to the cupcake you were saving for dessert." Etc.

Legend had it that children who kept such an item with them at all times and died, they could present it to the Reaper. If she was pleased, she would give many blessings in return. Little things like this could clue Savannah in on where some fairly advanced cultures existed – cultures where life was not taken for granted or otherwise seen as some sort of proving grounds, but seen for what it really is – a phase one goes through in the development of the soul. If she got the feeling that some recently reaped soul needed somewhere to go and heal from the horrors its previous existence experienced, Savannah could direct them to the kinder, more gentle culture.

In some cultures, Savannah was so thought of as a kind spirit, they deified her. She was known as The Mistress of Mercy. And people could actually look forward to meeting her.

Some kids would get excited and run up to give her gifts or just a greeting. It never failed to charm her, no matter how exhausted she was, nor how much gore she witnessed and became covered with.

When she took it upon herself to take a break, get some rest, get high and/or drunk, and there were sweet kids hanging around, she'd take them back to her place. A few of them stayed with her. A few of them became good friends of Autonomia's and wandered off with her. Some of them eventually became Savannah's servants. Not that she ordered them around. They genuinely loved her and wanted to look after her when she returned home - tired, filthy, and in need of relief. She'd often retire to her bedroom and find one of "her kids" asleep in her bed. After cleaning herself up, she'd cuddle with them and fall asleep. Unless she was truly exhausted, and just needed to sleep. She tended not to care about things like being covered head-to-toe in blood and gore when she just needed a rest.

As to the story…

Savannah lay quietly asleep when I tip-toed out of her chambers. Night was just falling there, and the sight of all the cute little toys and artwork coated with what looked like fresh blood took on a more sinister appearance when partially covered by shadows. It gave me the creepy-willies at night. At the time, I was too wide-awake to sleep. I'd slept a lot the past few days. Actually, most of the rest I got was when I was kinda passed-out from exhaustion.

I asked the clouds to return me to Ninkasi's Grand Hall and Autonomia's bedroom grove half an hour after Savannah abducted me from Ninkasi's bedroom chamber. And to provide me with some of the Revitalizing Brew I'd given Marduk.

So, There I Was…

Eris and Autonomia were reclining in hanging chairs they'd fashioned from vines which hung from the trees around the Goddess of the Everywhen's guest Grotto. They were pleasantly drunk on wine (*Or something*).

Wine's a totally different buzz than beer - or liquor, for that matter. Beer tends to make me rowdy. Wine makes me feel mellow. It's good for contemplative moods and tasks. Beer and liquor are party time beverages, as far as I'm concerned.

The two were relaxed and full of love for one another, I thought. They were so comfortable with one another, sipping their wine between bits of chatting and laughter. It seemed a shame to disturb them, but – dammit! - they are my family, after all, and I should get to partake in the good stuff, too! You know what I mean.

I had just begun to fashion a chair for myself when Zoe entered the grotto, handed me a flagon of the Revitalizing Brew, then departed. I was very pleased to discover it was possible to finish my chair/hammock one-handed. And took my seat, facing the two Goddesses.

Goddesses. I take that so much for granted now. Goddesses: the women I hang around with and take as lovers – wives, even! – are Goddesses. And I punched out the "God" other Beings considered to be the most powerful of them all - then, befriended him! I mean – this wasn't making any sort of sense to me. And it just grew more complex by the minute.

I'd already given up trying to reconcile the different timelines I'd experienced so far, and it wasn't even convoluted by this time. Who cares? I can – or will be able to, eventually – travel between different times at will, just as a matter of focus. Which would make me somewhat powerful, or at least very influential, in the way reality works. It's really too much responsibility for a Mortal to fathom. At least while I wasn't tripping.

Savannah had done an outstanding job of keeping me distracted while I was too high to do much of anything. Other than react to stimulus. Oh, so much stimulus did she provide. It was a good, long while before sobriety overtook me again, but somehow or other, the expanded consciousness of having eaten far too many psychedelics remained. I just decided not to worry about this timeline or that one and keep my attention focused on whatever was in front of me.

At this point in the story, the sight in front of me included two Goddesses who I adored. One of them I considered to be my daughter. I was pretty certain of that before I arrived here, but there were still doubts. I
mean – who am I to deserve such honors?

The ladies sat quietly while I made myself comfortable. There was no awkwardness to the near silence – the only sound to be heard was made by the Tree Frogs who hung out around the bubbling spring-fed pool.

I let out a very contented, very long sigh as I settled into my hanging chair.

"I feel as if I'm intruding," I halfway apologized, "but I need very much to begin to feel like I belong in this realm, and I could think of nowhere else where I would be as comfortable than with the two of you."

Neither one replied, they just smiled a little more. Eris's green eyes were nearly glowing. Autonomia put her glass down on a table which was by now bereft of the snacks I'd requested before I'd previously entered the Grotto.

"So, Gaian," Eris finally said, "what can you tell me about our daughter that she hasn't told me already?"

Rather than object to the fact that I had no idea what they had discussed in my absence, I looked from one to the other before my gaze settled on Eris. "I doubt she understands how powerful she is. Because she has no ambitions to rule or otherwise wield power."

"I've thought that as well." Her mother said. She cast a concerned glance Autonomia's way. "She seems to be horrifyingly powerful, as well as uncontrollable." Eris suddenly looked a bit frightened. Similar language was used to describe Tiamat when the Ancients discussed why they wished to destroy her. I felt a strong desire to protect my charming, disarmingly cute daughter.

"That's why I created a separate domain for her," I explained, "so she has a place to play around and do as she feels, without consequences in this one. Unless she desires otherwise."

Autonomia looked a little perplexed. I'd explained something she had not been able to figure out for herself. She turned to her mother. "He can do that?" she asked.

"He just did!" Eris said, her voice dripping with admiration. I sort of get it, now that I'm retelling this story.

Reality is a matter of consciousness. One can accept or reject experiences or things one encounters at will, if they don't fit into one's view of reality. When I mentioned that there was a new realm created for Autonomia to dwell in, without having to bother with what others thought about how she behaved, I essentially created it. Spontaneously. Just like that. Again, it wasn't something I really planned on doing, or knew how to do. I just envisioned it, and it was.

The quiet returned. Eris stretched and let out a long sigh. Autonomia rose from her seat to approach me. I rose from my seat to hug her – she hugs really well. She's so soft, and always has a sweet aroma.

"Mom, how long have you known my father?" Autonomia asked after she pivoted around to face Eris. She didn't wait for a reply.

"Why are you **not** fucking him?" she demanded of her mother. Eris looked like she was about to laugh, but was fighting the urge.

"Do you know where I am, right now?" our daughter asked. She reached over and grabbed my crotch.

"Right here, Mom!" Autonomia informed us. She gave me a squeeze. "I'm **trapped**, right here!" She pointed, for emphasis.

"Mom, I want you to liberate me from this!" she gave my package a sqeeze, still firmly in her grasp. I was beginning to feel like an item on exhibit for 'show and tell.'

"I'm right **here**, Mom!" Autonomia released me. "Come and get me!"

“I’m going to fetch Savannah,” she informed us as she gave me a good, solid hug. She kissed me on the cheek and whispered in my ear “Now get on with getting me conceived. I feel sort of unsure of myself, like I don’t really exist yet. I can’t really remember anything that’s come before now – except that I wanted to be here, now. I think you understand how that feels.” Yes, I did; but more than anything, I felt my daughter was far too involved in my sex life.

We kissed one another on the cheek and she pulled herself out of my grasp. “I’m off to party, and I doubt I’ll return here tonight. This night belongs to Savannah and me!” she called to her mother over her shoulder just as clouds began to obscure her from sight. “Love you both so much!”

“Love ya too, babe!” I told her as she disappeared. When I turned my eyes toward Eris, the Goddess was descending into the spring-fed pool, after she’d discarded her clothes.

What else could I do but likewise? I disrobed, with Eris’s watchful gaze upon me. Which was a little uncomfortable to me. After all, she was a Goddess, I was still a Mortal, and she was used to being around other Immortals. I felt somewhat inadequate.

The look on her face told me otherwise.

There’s no figuring out women, as far as I’m concerned. The Goddess of Chaos was enamored of me, as I had been with her for most of my life. Which, in actuality belonged to her, too. I’d already pledged it to her, decades before meeting her in the flesh, as it were.

And, oh! - that flesh. Words fail to describe her beauty. I just can’t. And, I’d just seen her naked. She’s just…flawless.

As I descended into the pool across from her, I was pleasantly surprised to find the water was warm. Once again, I let out an appreciative sigh, as I settled into the pool. And my wife – my freakin’ WIFE! The Goddess of Chaos, Eris - crossed the pool to embrace me with her arms and legs. She planted the sexiest kiss I’d ever had on my lips. She has the sexiest-tasting mouth, ever!

Everything was working as it should, and I have Savannah to thank for that. Her attention the past few weeks got me into game shape, if you will, and whereas before then I’d have been somewhat insecure about whether or not I could please a Goddess, now I felt eager to take on the challenge. Again.

There’s a little secret to that, though. Eris shook head-to-toe as she settled onto my lap and I entered her.

“Like fucking lightning!” she laughed at me, then had her way with me for the rest of the evening and past the following dawn.

The Immortals experience of time is so much different than we Mortals. Our short lives can pass so quickly to them, we can seem to be almost fleeting spirits at times. Unless they are focused on us. It’s sorta like the Everywhen, except it flows in one direction. They can experience time along with us when they want, and when in their domain, we can experience time as they do. The thing is, our mortal bodies emit quite a lot of energy. Not like theirs don’t, but with the Ancients, the energy is less concentrated. It’s emitted over a longer period of time. So, when Eris said “(It’s) like fucking lightning!” she meant sex with me was like having sex with electricity. A lot of electricity. From what I understand, it’s much, Much, MUCH more intense than sex with others of their

kind. No wonder there are so many tales of Immortals who just can't keep their hands off Mortal women.

Party Girls

"Introducing Autonomia, Goddess of the Everywhen!" a voice in the clouds bellowed. Autonomia danced her way down the Grand Stairway, spun around on one foot when she reached the floor, and raised one hand high above her head. As she did so, Savannah returned to the Grand Hall and trotted out to stand alongside Autonomia, also with a hand extended above her head. They looked like bookends. Chloe and Zoe joined them, one on each side of the Goddesses. When the four of them were in place, they called out to the Beings in the Grand Hall, "Hi, everyone! We're party favors!"

They joined hands and rushed over to a pile of futons and pillows in the middle of a circle of banquet tables laid out with food and beverages. Once there, they jumped into the cushions, pillows, and mattresses. And were immediately swarmed by the horniest amongst the Immortals present. For the rest of the night, sounds of unfettered glee, moans of pleasure, and cries of delight echoed through the Grand Hall. The girls did themselves proud, and that night is remembered as one of the highlights of the most acclaimed of all Ninkasi's Harvest Banquets.

Back in Autonomia's Guest Grotto

Eris lay asleep in my arms. She is such an affectionate lover. I wasn't expecting that. Honestly, though – I can say without exaggeration that I wasn't quite expecting anything about her as a lover. Do I have to remind you about how I see her? No?

Whereas Savannah had been all but insatiable, Eris was sweet and willing to enjoy what came her way. And, I suppose the energy she received from me was fairly overwhelming. I was the one who insisted we keep going. I'd held myself back for far too long with her, and I needed relief. When it finally arrived, I almost let out a scream. It felt like nothing I'd experienced before. I *may* have let out a roar, and *definitely* saw little spots of many, many colors flash before me. They obscured most of my vision. My entire body shivered, the hairs on my arms, legs, back, and neck stood on end. I felt as though I was going to pop like a balloon.

She kissed me deeply, passionately, and so sweetly as I came in her. Her legs wrapped tightly around me and she held me so close, I could scarcely breathe. We all but simultaneously let out long, contented sighs as our muscles relaxed and she sank back onto me. I had carried her to the inviting-looking bed long before, but needed to lift her back into the middle to allow us to both lay comfortably. She refused to let me go, so we settled onto the bed with her mostly on top of me, her long limbs intertwined with mine as she nuzzled her face against my chest and shoulder. One of us was purring. *(Other lovers have accused me of that. But, seriously – do people purr? Ever? The Immortals emit all sorts of sounds, so maybe they can purr if they feel like it.)*

Eris's sweetness as a lover caught me completely by surprise. She seemed so frail, so delicate. At first. Of course, we both kinda lost control now and then. The night was a continuous cycle of affectionate lovemaking and impassioned sexual fury. And there was no longer any doubt in my mind, in my heart, in my soul – I was in love with Eris. Because of the laws governing marriage amongst the Immortals, she **belongs** to me. As far as I was concerned, we belonged together now – it was no longer a relationship between a vain Mortal who could create miracles out of nowhere and the Goddess he adores. The Goddess Eris, my wife, lay asleep in my arms, wearing a smile so sweet, it made her look like a little girl-angel.

I was so happy, I was nearly in tears, and began to show signs that I was ready to get me some more Goddess lovin'. I was too content to spoil the moment, though. I laid there, softly stroking her hair with my fingertips until I fell asleep.

When I awoke, Eris was getting dressed with the help of one of her servants, who held a variety of dresses up for inspection. When Eris finally made a decision on which one to wear, the servant turned into a bank of clouds with the rejects and left.

"Hey, sleepyhead!" she reached over and ruffled my hair. "Our daughter seems to have been the hit of the party so far – even including yours on Marduk." She turned her gaze to a mirror and tugged on the dress until it fit her properly. Good choice, I thought immediately. She looked noble and hot. Not everybeing can pull off that look.

"My sweet love, my wife – I don't think I want to make love to anyone but you for the rest of my life." I told her as my eyes appraised the way she fit into her chosen garment.

"Oh, dear – you haven't made love with Ninkasi yet, have you?" At least this time it was one of my wives who encouraged me to have sex with someone else.

"Go to her, immediately, while you still have that thought in your mind. She'll give you reason to think otherwise." Eris shuddered. "She's an absolute ***angel*** in bed. You two are *very* well-suited for one another." Then, she went ahead and broached the subject I had dared not speculate about. "I'd be jealous," she informed me, "if I didn't know the three of us will be sharing a bed soon enough."

"Soon enough?!?" I thought. "Soon enough for who? If it were 'soon enough,' then why are we getting dressed? And where is Ninkasi? No way does this qualify as 'soon enough!'"

"Something's come up," I said, as I felt a profound change in Ninkasi's Sacred Hall. "I need to find Autonomia. She might be…fading?"

"Whatever you do, do NOT put off making love with Ninkasi for much longer. She really needs you in ways that I don't." Hmmm. No idea what to make of that, or her tone as she spoke the words.

“I need to go to wherever Autonomia is,” I told the clouds, and they transported me to the Banquet Hall.
Autonomia, Savannah, Chloe and Zoe lay in shambles amongst a pile of pillows covered in… various…juicy pools of…stuff that comes from bodies…all the stuffs…pools of it…pools…

“Can we get some cleansing rain here?” I asked, exasperated that I even had to ask. This was no way for Goddesses to look, not even after a long night of licentious debauchery deserving of record books and commemorative stelae.

Chloe and Zoe lay spread eagle. Their breath came in heaving swallows, yet their faces bore huge smiles. For the first time, I noticed they do not have bare skin, but are covered in very fine, very short fur. It was matted to the skin beneath, here and there, with…yeah…all that stuff. Pools of it. Pools.

Autonomia’s face was swollen in several places, her lower lip split and bleeding. She was missing a tooth. Or two. Or…

The cleansing rain was almost ice-cold at first, which made all the girls squeal and lurch. That’s when I noticed Savannah’s head. No time for that now, I thought, as I began to run my hands over my daughter’s bruised face. The gizmos on my arms once again powered up and bands around my wrists glowed green. I moved a hand across Autonomia’s swollen, bruised face. The bruises faded a bit, and the wound on her lip stopped bleeding. She made an attempt to sit up, but I held her firmly to disallow much motion. I stroked her face again and the bruises faded some more.

“Honey, you’re a Divine Mess.” I chastised her. That’s when I realized she was naked, but so covered with bruises, dried blood, dried…stuff…as to appear clothed. Somewhat.

“You should see the other guys!” she said as she held a triumphant fist aloft and looked off into the distance. This elicited a little bit of a laugh from Savannah, who absolutely shocked me by raising a hand into the air.

“That’s what I’m sayin’!” she tried to say. She got the words out, you understand – but they were more like squeaky little cries than…say…speech. Autonomia flung one of her hands at Savannah’s. It glanced off the side of her palm, which knocked both of their arms back into the pools of…stuff. They both began to cry a little.

“Savannah, do NOT move.” I told her. “I think your neck is broken.”

I can’t begin to explain just how disappointed I was with Savannah. This was no way for a Voluntary Concubine to behave – out getting fucked to death with her rowdy friends! And to think I trust her (someday) to be Autonomia’s nanny!

(*Now…how is **that** possible? Me having memories about things in the future? Mine and Savannah’s future, and Autonomia’s past. Apparent past. She hasn’t been born at this point in the story, you know. And should I even care about timelines and such anyways? At the time – there in the Banquet Hall - I had other things on my mind*.)

“Sweetheart, your *eyeballs* had bruises and whelps on them.” Autonomia giggled nervously and almost shrugged her shoulders. I think they were both out of socket. I stroked her face once again and prompted her to “Look at my hand, sweetie!” She tried. “No, dear, the one in front of you.” She didn’t move. I snapped my fingers a few times. “Up here, sweetie!

“Yeah, that’s my girl!” She finally located the correct hand. “Now, keep your eyes on my hand.” I slowly caused her face to pivot around until I could clearly see both of her eyes – thankfully!

She turned those eyes toward my face. “Oh, THERE you are!” she tried to laugh, but instead spit a whole tooth
out between her swollen lips.

“Everything hurts!” she cried, and leaned forward. She would have burst into tears and wailed aloud, but it would’ve hurt too much, so she settled on leaning forward for a soothing hug. I put my hands beneath her sagging armpits, then lifted them up quickly while I grabbed her arms above the elbows and jerked them up-and-outwards.

“Pa-DOP!” went her arms, as they both slipped back into their accustomed places. My daughter was too weak to pull away from me and wailed aloud now for real.

“*I just told you everything hurts!*” she pouted after she caught her breath, “You’re **mean**!” She cried some more.

“I’m **not** mean, and *you’re* hungover.” I informed her.

“It’s okay,” Savannah stage-whisper-squeaked. “Once everything…starts…going dark…doesn’t hurt…so much…any…more.” She went limp. It was a subtle change, but a change nonetheless.

“Savannah, I have to say,” I told her as I lay Autonomia down on a pillow the cleansing rain had cleansed. “I am more than a little disappointed in you. You’re her nanny! Or, you will be, one day. You *could* choose to be a more positive role model for my daughter.”

I carefully lifted her head, steadied her neck, and turned them towards where I thought they belonged. The green, glowing bands on my wrists revved way the fuck up and began to hum. I felt around with my fingers until I found what I believed was the top of Savannah’s spinal column, then set her neck down on it. The green bands grew all but blindingly bright, and the hum became a high-pitched whine, then “POP!” and her neck was back in place again, good as new. I don’t know why it popped. It shouldn’t have popped. Why did it pop?

Savannah was a little angry with me. “We’re around the same age, and that stuff hasn’t happened yet!” she spat at me. Then, all the pain she hadn’t felt for a while came flooding back into her consciousness. It took the breath clean out of her. “…oh…dear…god…” she gasped.

“It’s too late for flattery now, missy!” Volunteer or not, Savannah is my concubine, which makes her a slave, which means…she should…you know, not talk back to me and stuff. Insolent little hussy.

“Same age?” I mocked her. “So, *this* is what you did to prepare yourself for the job as her nanny?

“And, it hasn’t happened to *you*, yet - but it’s in *her* past!” I jerked a thumb in my daughter’s direction. “Dumb-butt…” I added under my breath.

“…mean…” she cried at me.

“Mean!” Autonomia seconded. I reached over and patted her tummy. Her eyes crossed and she fainted. The green bands worked their magic, though, and her internal organs were healed, all at once.

As I began to reach for her nearest leg, a fuzzy, little blue hand grabbed me firmly about the wrist.

“That’s enough from you, mister! We’ll take over from here!” Chloe insisted as she lifted Autonomia up from the cushions and laid my daughter’s arm across her blue-striped shoulders.

Zoe pushed past me, on her way to rescue Savannah. “Meanie!” she said as her fingertips brushed me back half a step.

“I’m NOT…” I began to protest, which was futile, since the clouds had already taken the four of them away.

With only a Mortal in the way, the cleansing rain became a raging downpour. I had to highstep my way out, as the water level quickly rose until all the cushions, pillows, futons, etc. were carried away by the current, whilst cleansing rainwater poured off me.

I’d just about had enough with that place. Other than meeting my Goddess wives, my Goddess daughter, and my Goddess concubine, and punching out and drinking with Marduk, and playing music, I was not having such a great time there. As a matter of fact, most of the best memories I’d made since I arrived took place in the Everywhen. “I need a break,” I muttered to myself. “I need to go somewhere where I get treated with a little respect.” I would have added “Is that too much for a motherfucker to ask?” except the clouds had already pounced on me and transported me…

Back to Ninkasi’s Bed Chamber

When the clouds parted, I was standing at the foot of Ninkasi’s bed. She lay there with one arm draped across her face. Overhead, some clouds were involved with a continuous replay of me punching out Marduk. Only, when his head snapped back and he toppled over on his back, a cartoon cloud, with a brightly-colored word appeared and briefly occluded the sight of my fist slamming into his jaw. The word would be “BAM!” or “BOOM!” or “BONK!” or “SMACK!” or… you get the idea. In the time the replay was visible to me, not a single word repeated. Not that I paid it much attention.

I shook my head, but had to smile as my gaze returned to my wife there in her/our bed. As the “our”ness of the bed cemented itself into my consciousness, I began to…well…you know… become very interested in the Immortal’s legal statutes concerning marriage and how they applied to this gorgeous, sexy, curvy babe laying before me. Legally, she *belongs* to…

“Gaian!” she squealed. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Sorry,” I said, and jerked a thumb towards the display in the clouds, “but that caught my attention. I mean, that’s hilarious.” I looked again and read aloud “KA-BLAM!” then let out a

little snort of a laugh and turned back to…where my wife had been. She'd leapt to her feet and come around the bed and wound up slightly behind me.
She wrapped her soft, strong arms around me.

"Darling," she cooed in my ear, "I need a break from this place. I feel like I've lost control. Take me away somewhere. Take me to your place."

She spun me around as she spoke, and ground herself into my crotch. What else could I do but appease her? I felt a strong need to appease the living daylights out of her.

"As you wish," I whispered into her ear, then lightly kissed its upper curve…and we were suddenly standing in a
bedroom which contained a huge, canopied bed, and not much else…at a casual glance. The bed rose fairly high up from the ground, and there were counters and tabletops hidden from view along its sides. Two of the room's four walls were floor-to-ceiling mirrors, one wall was floor-to-ceiling windows, and the fourth wall was…

Ninkasi distracted me while I surveyed my bedroom for the first time. I was a little disappointed. I'd have thought for sure I'd have a Grotto, like my daughter.

My wife knew what was important at the moment, much moreso than I did. She garnered 100 percent of my attention when she stepped out of the pile of clothes which until very, very recently kept her Divine curves concealed. She patiently began to tug on the buttons, clasps and clamps that held my outfit together, and I helped the best I could.

When I was in similar circumstances with Savannah, it had taken me a couple of hours to get dressed again. Some of the things fit together in a certain order, and the order was upset by the additions, like the gizmos on my arms. And it was dark.

Trial and error: I've never been afraid to rely on good old trial and error to get things done.

I picked Ninkasi up – an arm behind her back, an arm under her knees - as I stepped out of my boots and waded into the bed on my knees. She evidently found this to be romantic as fuck, from what I could tell by the way she was looking at me, and as I slowly lowered her onto the top of the bed, she rewarded me with absolutely the sweetest kiss I've ever experienced. Her mouth tasted of honey and toasted grains, and was very moist. Not in a slobbery sense, but in a well-lubricated sense. And hot. She felt hot all over, including inside her mouth. Well, everywhere. Inside. So hot.

She crawled out of my arms and parted her legs just enough to allow mine to fit between them. She shifted her arms so as to hold me closer. But, her boobs are so big, I had to make an effort to bend my face towards hers to keep our lips together. I felt as if her kiss was working some kind of magic love charm on me, and I was afraid to let our lips part for fear of breaking the spell. I shifted my weight onto my legs and hips as she parted her thighs a bit more, and when I moved between them, I entered her and slid about halfway in with the same motion.

"Whoa! Smooth move!" I congratulated myself before I continued to push myself completely into her.

She arched her back and pulled her lips from mine as she let out the slightest hint of a sigh and locked her ankles below my butt. She held me tightly with one arm, while the other one slid down the curve of my back. She is so strong and held me so tightly with her legs and arms, I could not move much at all. She began to rock her hips, ever so slightly, and she shivered all over. Her lower lip quivered and she let out a little cry/moan. (*I guess you had to be there.*)

I was not going to last long. Stamina had always been one of my strong points as a lover, but I doubt I lasted a combined 15 seconds before my first orgasms with Savannah, Eris, and Ninkasi. I didn't go soft, either. It felt so good, every time. I could just relax, catch my breath, and keep going.

Eris is right – Ninkasi and I are very well suited for one another. Also, Ninkasi had not had a male lover for something like 3200 years. Also, the "fucking lightning" thing.

Ninkasi never got crazy/out-of-control. Her body seemed to do that all by itself. I mean, she'd shiver so violently sometimes, the whole 4-post bed would rattle. Her eyes would roll back into her head and she'd let out these very prolonged moans, and at times had difficulty breathing. And, though her legs moved around a bit as she squirmed beneath me, and her arms sometimes changed position – she brushed the hair out of my face as needed, and sometimes ran her fingers through my hair as she gave me a long, long, deep kiss – she never loosened her grip on me. Our unhurriedness made every single thing we experienced – our breathing, any sounds we made, the subtle interactions of our tongues and lips, every motion of our lower bodies, everyfuckingthing we did - was felt in disproportionate measure. It was as if I'd never really experienced sex before, or more accurately, like no one'd ever made love with me before.

Eris's assessment of our wife is the only one that matters – Ninkasi's an absolute **angel** in bed. Which makes it much, much more thrilling when she gets hot and starts acting like…well…*not* an angel.

So, here's the deal: Savannah at her place; Eris in Autonomia's Guest Grotto; and Ninkasi in my bedroom. All my earliest experiences with my Goddesses occurred in the Everywhen. Those moments can stretch into eternities. I can return to any of those moments at will. Not just in my memory, but actually in person. So can they. We will be making love and having super-hot sex forever, in the Everywhen. Forever. We are there, making love, right now, as I type these words. All I have to do is concentrate a little, and it's like I'm in both places at the same time.

Those who are adept in moving through and with the Everywhen can divide themselves up amongst several times and experiences. Savannah tells me (*at some point*) it gets easier the more one does it, and there is no limit to how many experiences you can have at once.

Back a while ago…

Autonomia was brushing her hands of me, having just escorted me away to meet my concubine. Eris looked very amused. Her grown-up daughter was in danger of charming the pants off her. *(Those Sumerian Goddesses, let me tell ya…)*

"So, my darling one," Eris called to our daughter, "what kind of 'girl things' do we have to discuss?"

When Autonomia pivoted around to face her mother, she had an impish grin on her face, and hid her hands behind her back, as if she held something secret back there.

“Watch this!” she suggested. Autonomia’s knees became weak and she sagged around half a foot towards the floor. Her eyes rolled into her forehead, and she suddenly became short of breath. She let out a weak “Oooohhhhhhhhh!”

Her entire Being became a column of blinding light as she let out an impassioned scream. Then – ZAP! – whatever was happening had happened, and she stood before her mother again, partially obscured by steam - which poured out of every opening in her clothing. And from her hair, every exposed orifice, all her exposed skin.

“Oh, dear!” Eris exclaimed. “Darling, you’re smoldering!”

“Nah!” Autonomia replied and coughed a few times. “It’s…” she gagged a little, then put a finger up to close off one nostril, while she shot all the air in her lungs out through the other nostril. A three-foot long stream of fluids
accompanied the lungful of air. Out of her dainty, little nose.

“Excuse me,” she laughed, then did the same with the opposite nostrils, followed by a slight cough. After she spit out a thick wad of…stuff…she told her Mom, “It’s steam.”

“I just experienced every orgasm I’ve had or will have in the next and past 2 years! All at the same time! WHEEEEW!” She threw her arms out to her sides and pirouetted to the foot of the inviting-looking bed to collapse there. “I need some wine, clouds!”

Zoe marched in from out of a cloud to set a wine bottle and two glasses on an endtable. As she produced a bottle-opening device and began to utilize it, she told the Goddesses: “I think you’ll find this Schiava quite pleasant for afternoon sipping. It’s light, so it won’t put you off food.”

She freed the cork from its bottle and handed it to Eris. Eris obligingly gave the cork a whiff. “OH, my!” she appraised the scent. “This smells delightful! Zoe, you **never** cease to amaze me.”

Zoe’s eyes glowed. “Oh,” she had to shake herself out of the fog Eris’s compliment put her head into. “And this should go fairly well with the caviar and cheeses already here.”

Zoe looked well pleased with herself as she turned and abruptly left the Grotto.

“I can show you how to do that, if you want.” Autonomia offered as her mother poured two glasses of wine for them to enjoy. The steam was dissipating, but Autonomia had to wave her hand a bit to clear it away.

“Here, let me give you a demonstration,” our daughter held her hand out for her mother to grasp. Her mother didn’t seem to be in a hurry to take ahold of it. “Oh, don’t worry – I’ll start you out with something simple – all the orgasms you experienced with Ninkasi the past week.” Before Eris could object to the proposition, Autonomia grabbed her mother’s wrist. Eris became rigid, then limp, and she was having difficulty breathing. Autonomia pulled her mother down, alongside her on the bed. Eris’s entire body heaved a few times, then she became a pillar of white light and let out a bloodcurdling scream. (*Bloodcurdling in a **good** sense. Guess ya had to be there.*)

So…ZAP! The light disappeared to reveal Eris, who was trying to breath – it seemed so easy just seconds ago – and Autonomia laughed a little.

“Goodness, you two get ***busy***!” Then, the steam began to dissipate. Autonomia took a long look at her mother, sat up on her knees to take a closer look, then tumbled all the way to the edge of the bed and onto the floor, laughing.

The little specks of color thing happened to Eris as she tried to shake off…the most ***divine*** feeling she’d ever felt. Ninkasi had been in one of her Romantic moods just three evenings before the Hootenanny, and they didn’t do much but make love for the next two nights and days. (*Her moods…gotta love ‘em!*)

Rather than clearing her head, the shaking only seemed to make Eris dizzier. She tried to raise her head, then decided there was no point in doing so and relented. Her head began to clear. The darkness which threatened to completely occlude her vision subsided. And breathing became quite a bit easier for her, though it still seemed she didn’t used to have to think “Okay, breath in…breath out…”

She gagged, then shot her own snotstreams to clear her nasal cavities and coughed to clear her throat. “Child! That was…what’s so funny?” the Goddess of Chaos panted.

Autonomia peeked over the edge of her bed. “Mirrors!” she called. Her mother could only see Autonomia’s eyes.
Her nose and mouth were obscured by the bed.

“Your HAIR!” Autonomia’s eyes burst into the biggest smiles anyone could ever imagine, as far as eyes go, and she laughed again. Seriously, it looked as if her eyes were laughing. (*So charming. My daughter is just so charming. I love her so much!*)

Mirrors suddenly appeared before Eris. To refer to Eris’s hair at that moment as “disheveled” would be a ridiculous abuse of language. It looked like several creatures with longish, red fur had gotten into a fight on her head, and all died there, fur and limbs protruding everywhere, coated with long strands of fine, red hair.

Eris immediately put her hands up to do something about the hair, but immediately thought the better of it, gave up the task, and relaxed. She took a deep breath.

“Child…?” she began to ask.

“Yes mother?” Autonomia’s eyes dutifully responded.

“Can we do that again?”

Autonomia squealed with delight and sprang from the floor onto the bed in one, fluid motion. She looked all the world like a catgirl at that moment. She snatched up one of her mom’s hands with both of hers.

Eris went totally limp and emitted a long, long moan. As her body heated and she became iridescent, she
squealed and began to laugh. After becoming all light again – almost as bright as the first time – she squealed a
bit louder. And – Zap! The steam, the snotstreams, the cough.

Only this time, she lay motionless afterwards. After a few seconds, she sniffed and dabbed at her nose with her sleeve. She began to cry. “Oh, darling – I’m so happy! What was that?”

Autonomia put her face down, atop her mother's, so that their noses touched. "I'm not gonna tell ya!"

She shifted her weight to sit beside her mother and gently prodded Eris to rest her head on her daughter's lap. When Eris was settled, Autonomia began to comb her mom's hair with her fingers. "I'll tell you at some point. But for now," she reached over to an end table, opened a drawer, and pulled out a brush. "Just lay there and enjoy the sensation."

After a few strokes with the brush, Autonomia whispered, "You look so peaceful and happy right now…"

"Okay, I'll tell you, if you still want to know…" Two more strokes, and Eris lay asleep, a satisfied grin on her face. Autonomia even thought she heard her mom purr. "It's every orgasm you had with Pops, the first time ya'll got together!" she whispered, then leaned over to kiss her mother's temple.

"You're just so freakin' beautiful…" Autonomia said as she continued to brush her mom's hair. "So beautiful…"

An entire month later

"Sweetheart," I cooed into Ninkasi's ear as she nuzzled her face into my neck, settled herself onto my lap, and I entered her again.

"Ummm," she purred as she began to kiss me anywhere her lips could reach.

Definitely, the Immortals can purr.

"Remember when we first met, at the Harvest Hootenanny?" I goaded her.

"Mmmmm…" she replied.

I took that to mean "Yes, I certainly do."

She squeezed me. Internally. I've mentioned how strong she is, right? She has strong muscles. Everywhere.

"Uhgnnn," I said. She gave a slight giggle, slowly began to gyrate her hips, and gave me another squeeze.

If I hadn't had an orgasm very, very recently, I would have come right then. Maybe I did, a little bit. All I can really say at this time is we had surpassed the "Exquisite Ecstasy" plateau a while back and were in uncharted territory, as far as Divine Lovemaking goes. I could not go soft. But - I really, really needed a break. I needed time to heal. Seriously, I think I was able to stay erect

because of bruises. I think there were places on me that were worn thin and in danger of splitting open. Luckily for me, Ninkasi remained very well-lubricated throughout our first month together. There were times, though, that I was worried she'd give me a squeeze and POP! I think you get the idea. It was a haunting worry, somewhere back in the recesses of my mind.

I'd put the thought of calling for the clouds to bring Eris to us out of my mind *weeks* ago. I mean – Holy Goddess Love! – this was beyond Divine. Ninkasi has this way of bringing me to the peak of sexual exaltation till I feel like I can't take it anymore, then - BAM! – she transports me to a place of euphoric intoxication unlike anything any Mortal could conceive. I had serious concerns regarding my sanity at times. And, here she was, fucking lightning, as it were. Oh, sure – Eris will always be regarded as sexier by far, but that's only because Ninkasi has only had something like four lovers, ever. And I doubt anyone could ever be able to recall making love with Ninkasi without immediately going to her for more. I can't see how Eris can ever pry herself away from her wife. I mean…***why***? Nothing one could experience anywhere, anytime could compare to letting Ninkasi have her way with one.

She gave me a brief kiss and let her head roll back as she shivered. I held her tightly, after repositioning my arms a little lower on her back. When I pulled her closer, her breasts slid to my upper chest, from where they previously rested, against my ribs either side of the sternum. Our sweat lubricated our skin enough to make this pleasurable. So, very pleasurable. She squealed. She doesn't do that often.

She rewarded me with a long, loving kiss.

"You told me you felt like you were losing control of your banquet just before we left," I reminded her. "Remember - waaaay back when…?"

"Hush!" she whispered. "…and do that again!"

"My love – I think you're going to fuck me to death!" I exclaimed in hushed tones. I thought to myself "…and maybe that isn't such a bad thing…?"

"We're not ready for that yet." She whispered again, directly into my ear before she kissed it.

"My love," I protested, "you're in danger of destroying my dick."

Her head reared backwards, and she laughed out loud.

"**Awesome!**" she roared, and I got my first glimpse of Ninkasi as a powerful, inhuman Goddess. It scared the crap out of me, in a non-literal sense. (*Honestly!*)

Lightning shot out of her hair, her eyes glowed and emitted a bright blue light, she began to vibrate all over – inside and out. I had what would have passed as an orgasm, but shot a blank. I was all out of ammo, so to speak.
It hurt.

Her nipples glowed red, as did the inside of her mouth, and she let out a mighty roar that shook the fabric of the Everywhen. I worried she might have even broken it.

I put the fear I felt aside, and into the void it left behind, I felt violent urges well up inside me. I felt a strong desire to shove her off my lap and beat the hell out of her.

Suddenly, she dove right off me, threw herself onto my bed and began to wail.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” she lamented as she tried to hide her face with her fists. I tried to grab one of her arms, but she pulled herself farther away from me. “**Don’t look at me!**” she screamed.

I wasn’t having it. I pushed myself to her side and wrapped my arms around her.

“**No!**” she screamed. “Let **go** of me!” She turned to look at me. She still bore her fierce manifestation, and her whole body was beginning to glow from a blue light which seemed to emerge from within. There was nothing but rage in her appearance.

“**Get away from me, *MORTAL*!**” she commanded, her voice full of hatred. Lightning shot from her hair, which was standing on end.

“You BELONG to ME!” I shouted back. “**KILL ME!**”

The tips of her hair turned towards me and lightning shot from all of it. The lightning combined into a single flash, which engulfed my entire Being. I flew backwards, off the bed, and skidded across the floor until I hit the far wall. I was smoldering. The hair and skin had burned off my entire body.

I immediately sprung to my feet and leapt back onto the bed - though there was no longer any indication I had suffered any damage. Ninkasi was busy laughing, her head thrown back with the effort. As I landed on the bed in front of her, I hit her in the sternum with an open palm, forced her onto her back and pinned her to the mattress.

Her colorful countenance receded until my sweet wife lay beneath me again. Now, the rage was in *my* eyes, and
she looked frightened. We stared at one another for a few seconds. Neither one of us knew how to proceed from
that moment. “NO! Please!” she squeaked.

She began to cry. “I’m sorry!” she wailed again. “Oh, Gaian – you should never have been subjected to that. I don’t know how it happened! I’m so sorry!” She sobbed uncontrollably for a little while and tried to move away from me. I held her firmly in place. My eyes firmly held her gaze as well. She shook her head back and forth. She was really, really frightened. I had no idea what to do with or about her.

Her wails subsided and she attempted to break eye contact, but I kept mine in place, and she was compelled to keep looking into them. “Not so cute now, am I?” I thought. And smiled.

She kept her eyes on mine for a few more seconds, then squeaked “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know” I assessed my situation. “I’ve never been dead before.”

Tears flowed from her eyes.

“Babe – I love you. All of you.” I reassured her. She looked bewildered, haunted. “The sweet loving bits of you. The raging out-of-control you. All of your monstrous self.”

Tears began to flow out of her eyes in torrents now.

“I knew this job was dangerous when I took it,” I said. And lifted the arm I held in one of my hands to my face. I kissed her fingers, then released her arm. With my hand free, I reached over and stroked her hair. “Are YOU okay?”

She sniffed, then started to speak, but thought the better of it and closed her mouth.

“C’mon!” I urged her. “Out with it!”

“You wouldn’t believe how hard I came when I killed you.” We both laughed – her nervously, me delightedly.

“Well, then” I said, “it was worth it!” We both burst into uproarious laughter then. She suddenly sat upright.

She looked more beautiful than I’d ever seen her, at that moment. Apparently, when the Ancients blow a fuse, it refreshes their humanlike appearance. (*There’s something more to it than that, I eventually found out.*)

“Eris is going to be so angry!” she picked up a bit of the bedsheet to dry her eyes. “We agreed to keep you in your mortal form until we…experienced our first three-way.”

“I’m sure there’s a solution to be found in the Everywhen,” I consoled her.

“It might not make much of a difference, actually.” She told me. “You are one hell of a lover, mister.”

“Master…?” I prodded her.

She sprang up on her knees, folded her hands into one another, as if in prayer. “You are one hell of a lover, master!” she praised me.

We burst into laughter and rolled into one another’s arms. After a brief, but very passionate kiss, I pushed her away.

“Darlin’” I explained, “I think we’ll do some permanent damage if we get going again.”

“My love,” she explained, “Your astral body cannot be harmed so readily.” She reached down, gave me a stroke, and a squeeze. It didn’t hurt at all. As a matter of fact…

The Harvest Hootenanny, Night Three

Around a week later, I finally convinced the Goddess of Brewing that we really should get back to her place – especially if she felt like she had lost control.

Before we stepped into the clouds, I asked her “Would you be a darling and find our wife? Bring her along to where Autonomia and Savannah are. That’s where I’m headed.”

“You heard the man, clouds!” she spoke as we headed out of my bedroom. I was really sad to leave. The past weeks there may count as the best weeks of my life. Dead, at 64. And what a way to go! I drove my wife out of her mind with passion, until she had no choice but to kill me. Anyways, that’s my story and I’m sticking to it!

And – no! – I do not hold it against Ninkasi for killing me. I should have just kept my mouth shut and taken it like a man. After I’d resurrected Savannah, I was very curious about how it felt to be fucked to death. And now, the opportunity to have that experience is lost forever. (*Or not – we’ll see about that!*)

Oh - but after being killed, I figured out why Savannah “popped” when I healed her broken neck. She might not have been dead for long, but she was good and dead by then. She needed a jumpstart. So, there you have it. “Pop!” and she perked right up.

I emerged from the clouds in some little-used room. There were several beds along two long walls. Autonomia and Savannah lay in two, opposite one another, while Chloe and Zoe attended to them. I was on the far side of the room when I arrived, so they may not have noticed me at first. I was able to observe them as I approached. They busied themselves by applying…

“**Makeup?!?**” I bellowed. “That’s your idea of helping?”

Chloe stood up to face me. “It’s to cover up the bruises. A *man* wouldn’t understand!”

I swatted her with a backhand, across her face. Zoe had been in the process of standing when I did so, but recoiled in horror as a few drops of blood landed on her chest and shoulders. I’d smacked Chloe across her mouth and split one of her lips. Eris and Ninkasi had already emerged from the clouds and stood behind the servants. Eris stood with her arms folded beneath her breasts. Ninkasi looked concerned, but put her hands together, behind her back.

“On your knees, both of you!” I commanded the twins. They immediately fell to all fours, with their heads
bowed.

“You’ve had your fun with me until now, but I’ll tolerate no more insolence from SERVANTS!” The anger in my voice…I even scared myself a little bit.

“I may be a newcomer, but I do know a little about Sumerian Law. Ninkasi and Eris consider me their husband, which makes me the highest-ranked person in their Halls. I don’t even **like** patriarchal societies, but here we are. So, no more fun at my expense. Not by the servants. Do you understand?”

The twins murmured “Yes, m’lord!”

“My daughter and concubine are both suffering from close-to-fatal injuries, and you two have prevented me from
healing them! I will not allow either of you to do anything of this sort again!” I bellowed. “Do you two understand what I mean, when I say ‘I will not allow this?’”

Zoe sniffled, “My lord…” she started to say.

“Silence!” I shouted. “I asked you a question!”

“Yes, My Lord,” they cried. Tears were dripping from their faces to the ground.

I walked over to Chloe and tucked a finger beneath her chin. “Look up,” I demanded. She looked up and made eye contact with me. She looked defiant and quite a bit afraid. I was relieved. I didn’t want to break her spirit. I just wanted a little token of respect as the man of the house. I gently brushed her split lip with a thumb, the Gizmo revved up, the glowing green bands did whatever it is they do, and her lip healed. “There,” I softly spoke to her. “Is there any pain?”

She shook her head and tears continued to leak out of her eyes.

“There are a few days left for the Hootenanny,” I reminded her. “I don’t want you to have any distractions. Your Mistress relies on the two of you.”

“I’m okay,” Chloe told me in a hoarse whisper. A fat tear rolled down her cheek and I wiped it away with my thumb.

“I know I introduced myself as a War Wizard, but my calling is healing.” I released her chin. “Whoever made these Gizmos on my arms understands me well.” I leaned over and kissed Chloe on her forehead.

“Now, let’s all work together to make this the best Hootenanny ever,” I asked of them. “You may rise and accompany your mistresses.”

The twins stood upright and turned to leave. They were a little shocked to see the Goddesses standing behind them. Eris looked pleased with my performance. Ninkasi looked like she was ready to drag me off to her bedroom.

“Zoe, Chloe: This way…” Ninkasi turned and walked off into the clouds.

A Concubine and a Daughter

I moved over to my daughter, who was awake and a little frightened by my outburst. I ran my hands along her body, from her shoulders, along the outside curves of her chest, waist, and hips. Then shifted myself so as to run my hands from her toes to her hips. As I did so, the Gizmos (*I decided to give them an official title, and couldn’t really come up with a catchy name…*) powered up again. The green bands around my wrists (*Green as a sign of good health!*) fired up, and the bruises faded away. A bone snapped back into its proper form – I hadn’t noticed the fracture. I pulled a sheet up from the foot of the bed to cover her.

I turned my attention to Savannah and followed the same procedure with her. Afterward, I raised a sheet to cover her nakedness, too. And continued until I’d raised it over her head.

“It’s too late!” I said as I let the sheet float down to hide Savannah’s face. “I’m afraid she’s gone for good.”

“That’s not *funny*, dude!” Autonomia angrily spat at me.

“Come on, babe,” I said. “It’s a little funny!”

Savannah sat up. “C’mon, Autie,” she urged, “Get ‘im!”

The two of them were immediately all over me. Savannah pinned my arms behind my back, while Autonomia relentlessly tickled me. The girl **really** knows how to tickle.

“Help me!” I mock-pleaded. “Someone please ***help*** me!”

“Ha, ha!” Autonomia replied with a mock-sinister (*yet quite convincing*) laugh. “There **is** no help for you!”

We tumbled over their beds and landed on the flour. I used the moments of tumbling, confused movement to turn the tides on the girls, and pinned each beneath a knee, while I tickled them like they’d never been tickled before.

I felt a little awkward. They were both still naked. Neither one was covered by their bedsheets. Savannah’s was partially wrapped around one of her thighs. Autonomia’s lay haphazardly across her lap.

“Okay, that’s enough!” I suggested as I ceased tickling. The girls took a few seconds to compose themselves. Neither one seemed to be in a hurry to cover themselves, I noticed.

“You know,” Savannah told us, “if we were to tie a couple of these beds together, they’d be just the right size for the three of us to…” she gazed at Autonomia, and when they made eye contact, Savannah gave her eyebrows a couple of rises.

I was not amused. “With my daughter?” I demanded as I jerked a thumb towards her.

“So what if she is?” Savannah defiantly asked. “Just look at her, looking so cute, alluring, and already naked!”

Autonomia batted her eyes at me and puffed out her chest.

For the life of me, I did not see this coming. Goddesses – they think they can just…

“I don’t know how I feel about fooling around with my daughter,” I honestly asserted.

Autonomia looked a little peeved.

“It’s not *fair*!” she admonished me.

I was at a total loss about what to do about this turn of events. I tried to think of something to say, but my mind was not even slightly prepared for such an occurrence.

“How come *Savannah* gets to be your concubine?” Autonomia demanded, and pouted a bit.

“*Autie!*” Savannah cautioned her.

“Well, it’s not **fair**!” my daughter repeated. She folded her arms under her breasts to display her displeasures.

I already knew how this was going to turn out, but I wasn’t really all that eager to proceed.

"*What*'s not fair?" I stalled for time.

"Autonomia!" Savannah began to raise her voice.

"Don't act like you don't already know!" she scolded me.

"**You promised!**" Savannah reminded my daughter.

We settled into an uncomfortable silence, the two of them glaring at one another and Autonomia's left index finger a-tap on her opposite arm.

"Know…what?" I ventured to ask.

"Savannah…" Autonomia began to explain.

"**Autonomia!**" Savannah all but shouted.

"Savannah's your daughter, too!" my girl sputtered.

"**AUTONOMIA!**" Savannah was aghast. "**You promised not to tell!**"

My hitherto only daughter turned her attention to me. "How come *she* gets to be your concubine? It's not fair!"

I had no words. But I had to act fast, or this situation would devolve into a full-blown sister fight. No one wanted that.

"Who…?" I thought aloud.

"**Ki**, stupid!" Autonomia informed me. I did, indeed, feel stupid to have posed the question..

Savannah further elucidated, "Mom met Autonomia and completely fell in love!"

Autonomia titled her torso so as to present herself in profile to me. She looked rather proud of herself. "She
asked me where she could get a daughter like me!" She raised her chin a bit. "I took her to the Everywhen, and she was well impressed with your work." She popped an eye open in my direction. "She moved in!"

"But I haven't even met Ki yet!" I protested.

"Sooo…?" the girls asked at the same time, while they rolled their eyes. I don't think either one had been born at that point in my story.

I tried to remember any and every odd, inexplicable sexual encounter I'd had in the recent past. There were too many to consider. I shook my head at the prospect of discovering how Ki had become pregnant by me.

"That time with the cephalopod?" I offered at last.

The girls were flabberblasted.

"What about the cephalopod?" Autonomia asked.

This discussion was getting to be extraordinarily uncomfortable for me. Still, I was curious, and seemed to have defused the sister fight situation.

“You see, I’d always thought of that as your mother’s doing!” I told her.

She was irate, as if I were casting aspersions her mother’s way. She scowled and looked away.

“Thought *what* was Eris’s doing?” Savannah asked. She seemed to be genuinely interested.

“Well,” I began, while attempting to keep what I was trying to express in as clinical language as I could. This was getting more awkward by the second, “There was this one morning…” Both of my girls began to take an interest in what I was saying.

“I must have had a really realistic, very romantic dream that night, because I woke up with the expectation someone would be there, by my side.” They made themselves a bit more comfortable, to listen to what I was telling them. But still didn’t make any effort to cover themselves.

“I was very let down when I found myself alone.” I swallowed. “I almost felt as though I’d been jilted by a lover, I was so certain there would be someone with me when I awoke.

“The residual feeling of being in love and ready to get an armful of my lover left me very…”… this was getting to be *very* awkward for me…“…**firmly**, in anticipation of some affection… like…” I swallowed again. My mouth was beginning to dry out.

“So, I began to…” my voice cracked a little.

“Touch yourself?” Savannah coaxed. She was suddenly much more interested.

“Yes!” I admitted. “And it didn’t take much effort, believe me!” I let my guard down, somewhat. I concentrated a little more. “I don’t remember if there was any pain…” I conjectured.

The girls looked concerned.

“You see,” I explained, “I was alone those days, and by that I mean I didn’t have a lover at the time.” It was a little
easier to continue, now that I’d dealt with the more personal aspects of the…occurrence.

“So, when a guy hasn’t had sex for a while, and suddenly has a blast, so to speak,” it was getting to be awkward again, “well, sometimes the ducts that convey the various seminal fluids along the way become a little shriveled from their lack of use, and the force of the…” I swallowed again “…fluids being forced along the way can actually cause damage. In extreme cases, this can even cause death!”

The girls looked very alarmed now – shocked, even!

“And as I began to clean up,” I creaked along with the tale, “I noticed some discoloration in the fluids – a greyish blob.”

The girls were totally grossed out now, and displayed faces to show it. Autonomia’s eyes were wide with astonishment, while Savannah seemed to have a couple of dry heaves.

“But, when I took a closer look at the discoloration, I clearly saw a cephalopod in my semen.”

The girls looked concerned again, but still mostly grossed-out.

“I was doing a lot of drugs back in those days, so seeing oceanic lifeforms in my semen wasn’t as shocking as one might think.

“As I recall now,” I was beginning to feel good about remembering the incident, “I was rather surprised to see the discoloration, because there had **not** been any pain…” I was well satisfied with my ability to recall such details. “…when I shot…my…” The discomfort in relating the story returned “…load…” my voice trailed off at the end, there.

We sat in silence for a few seconds. Autonomia looked perplexed and disgusted, whilst Savannah looked curious. And disgusted. Aunomomia’s gaze was off in the distance, somewhere over my shoulders, as if she were having difficulty processing this information. She looked back to me and broke the silence.

“You had a cephalopod…in your nutsack?” she asked.

“There’s no reason to think that!” I said, defensively. “Lady Ki likely sent it along afterwards, to collect a sample.”

There! The topic was over and done with, and the girls were no longer focused on having a 3-some with their father and half-sisters. My mind still goes blank when I think of that moment. I was terrified of saying anything more, for fear of sending the conversation back towards uncomfortability. Still – no one likes prolonged silences in conversations

“That incident sticks out in my mind so clearly, because there was no pain involved,” I reminisced. “There were other times…”

“Okay, I’m done here,” Autonomia said as she began to wrap her bedsheet around herself.

“I feel icky all over,” she summed up the ordeal. She stood to leave and wrapped herself up in a bedsheet. “I’m going to take a shower and get something to eat.”

“I’m hungry, too,” I added as I stood to leave. Savannah shot to her feet in order to give me a hug. After she wrapped a sheet around herself, she took my hand as we began to follow Autonomia down the hallway.

“You know, it really *is* unfair for you not to take Autonomia as your concubine, too!” she told me.

“Yeah,” I replied, “Just like it was unfair of you not to warn me you were my daughter!”

“‘WARN’ you!” Savannah coughed. She was clearly offended. She abruptly dropped my hand, folded her arms under her breasts, and eyed me defiantly.

“Would you have taken me if you knew?” she demanded to know. I was slow to respond, so she continued. “Yeah, I thought not. I knew you wouldn’t want me if you knew!”

She looked a little triumphant just then.

There’s no way anybeing – not even her devout father – could look at Savannah and not want her. Autonomia says everybeing who meets her half-sister immediately falls in love with her. Savannah wouldn’t know. To her, that’s just the way folks are.

Savannah gave me a peck on the cheek. “I’m absolutely starved!” she told me. “I’m going to find some clothes and
eat before I have a bath!”

“You might want to prioritize the bath, dear!” I recommended.

She looked a little vexed, but nodded her assent as she began to leave.

“Okay, Dad!” she called over her shoulder. She stopped and pivoted around to face me. “And I **am** still your concubine – just so you know.” She blew me a kiss.

I stood there, watching her recede down the corridor. I was an uncarved block at that moment, with no way to reference what had just transpired, nor what lay in store for me, in the future. She turned again. “Dad, what’s a cephalopod?”

“They are boneless creatures who dwell in the Earth’s oceans – like squids and octopi!” I lectured. “In my instance, it was a cuttlefish. A *tiny*, little cuttlefish.”

She hummed and nodded as she resumed her trip towards the public baths. She looked a little grossed-out again.

“Kids!” I thought as I shook my head. I hung my head and corrected myself: “Goddesses… freakin’ Goddesses…”

A Luxurious Bath

“I need a nice cleaning up!” I suggested to the clouds. They transported me to the public bath, where I immediately began to undress. I wasn’t sure what to do with the Gizmos, so I just wrapped them up in my cloak.

“Think I could get a change of clothing, or at least have these laundered?” I asked no one in particular.

A male servant strolled over and took the bundle of clothing I’d laid on a bench.

“These will be returned to your Ladies’ chambers when laundered.” He motioned to a closet door set into a wall behind me. The entire wall was a row of closet doors. “Speak your name as you stand before this door,” he gave a door some taps with his knuckles, “and it will open for you. You will find more outfits to choose from in there.”

As he explained, his eyes drifted up and down my naked self in appraisal. “Yet another sassy servant!” I thought. “Is there no end to them?”

“And your name is…?” I inquired.

“There are those who call me…Tim.” He hinted at me.

“Thank you, Tim.” I said.

He smiled, bowed his head, turned, and went about his duties. Whatever they were.

I spoke my name towards the door Tim had pointed out, and it popped open. Just as he predicted, there were numerous outfits hanging inside, and a few pairs of boots and other footwear lined up neatly along the floor. After setting my gizmos inside, I pushed the door shut and headed towards the source of the steam I saw drifting out of a hallway. Which led to a large, warm pool. There were various creatures and other Immortals bathing, chatting, and hanging out along the sides of the pool. I took a brief look around and waded in.

The water felt soothing and sorta bubbly. After a few steps in, I sat on the pool’s bottom. The water was up to my neck. I took a lungful of air and laid myself back, totally relaxed and calm. The bubbly water began to foam around me, especially in my hair. When I sat up again, I halfway expected to see a film of filthy water trailing away from me.

All I saw, though, was a flow of thick, foamy-looking water, which faded into the pool as it receded.

I felt not only clean, but invigorated as well. These Immortals live quite a luxurious lifestyle, I gotta hand it to them.

I moved towards the edge of the pool, so as to recline against the side and relax. The water felt so good, I wanted to sit there and enjoy its effects for a while.

“Well - hello, Gaian!” a very, very sultry woman’s voice cooed to me. I turned to see the extraordinarily beautiful woman who’d ushered Marduk away after we had our little chat. Sarpanit! That’s her name. How odd that I can recall it so readily. I must have some connection to her at some point. She’s a Fertility Goddess, and part Human.

“Greetings, Sarpanit!” I replied.

“It’s good to run into you like this – in such an informal manner!” Her eyes sparkled as she spoke. She really has this Fertility Goddess thing down. I’d have completely fallen for her charms already, if I weren’t already married to the absolutely most perfectly suited lover for me, as well as the sexiest, most beautiful female anything, ever.

Sarpanit settled beside me at a respectful distance. I gave the other Beings a quick once-over, in the hope that Marduk wasn’t around. Our new-found friendship wasn’t so solidly established that I could count on him not to
be overcome with jealousy as I sat beside his wife, the both of us completely naked.

“My husband is well impressed with you,” she told me, as her eyes sparkled and began to glow a bit. “Few others would approach him humbly as you did, and there is none who would even dream of socking him on his jaw. You are certainly one-of-a-kind.” She tittered a bit.

“Why, thank you both for not thinking poorly of me,” I said as graciously as I could manage. I felt more than a little uncomfortable there. The warm, soothing water worked like magic to put me at ease, though, and while completely relaxed, I could not help but become…well… noticeably…emotionally…**moved** by the proximity of one of the most beautiful human-born women who ever walked the Earth, and who is a Fertility Goddess to boot.

I doubt if ya'll realize this, but Fertility Goddesses need lots of lovin'. Lots and lots. So much. And they accrue attributes to help ensure they get all the attention they need. Like, they emit an unusual amount of pheromones. Especially when they sweat. And when they have someone's attention, and their eyes lock onto one another's, the Goddess's eyes will sparkle in order to enchant the one they are addressing. And there is really nothing one can do about it. Therefore, I was getting very emotionally…erect…as we spoke.

"I only wish there was some way to reconcile the pain he's caused my loves." I shook my head and broke eye contact with her. I was ready to cry at that moment.

"Oh, you sweet man," she said in a hoarse whisper, "you are such a dear! I have no idea what it would take to remove their pain and soothe their trauma, but if it can be done, I'm absolutely certain it will be you who finds the way." She sniffed a little and splashed water onto her face to wash away the tears forming there.

"My husband and I both would appreciate your presence in our Halls at any time, but if you could see it in your heart to tear yourself away from this splendid banquet, we would enjoy your company when we depart later to return to our own Halls."

Before I could ask why they would leave such a festive place early, I reminded myself how unusual it was that Marduk was allowed here at all. I began to feel as if I should protect my loves - toss Marduk and his family out and demand they never show themselves around here again.

I wasn't sure how that would turn out, though. Sarpanit saw the consternation in my face.

"Ninkasi's Harvest Banquets are the highlight of all festivals and celebrations in our year. It's when newcomers are introduced and welcomed into our realm. And dear Ninkasi always has surprises awaiting us, in the brews she makes for each one." She laughed a delightful little laugh. "This year's was just too over-the-top, even for her." Her eyes lit up with her smile. Stunning. She's absolutely stunning when she smiles so brightly.

"Don't let anyone know," she leaned towards me and whispered conspiratorially: "My husband enjoyed being the center of attention while everyone was dancing and having a good time.

"I doubt he's ever experienced anything like that before. He actually hopes the others will not see him as such a frightful thing anymore. You should see how they cringe when he speaks to them!"

"Well," I said, "I certainly have changed my mind about who he is and what he's like, since meeting him."

"And," the Fertility Goddess informed me, "you have embedded yourself into the annuls of our realm, right from the start. Your appearance here has changed everything! No one can stop talking about you, whether it be about knocking out my husband, your performance with the minstrels, the way Ninkasi claimed you for her own -immediately! How she and Eris took you for their champion and husband! How your concubine shamed herself as a 'party favor' and you brought her back to life. You are something special, and no one knows what you'll do next, but everybeing has unrealistically grand expectations of you."

Her tone hinted she had issued me a warning in her casual appraisal of the disruption my presence made in their realm. I could see her point, though - I represented something unknown

and alien to them, from a world they once held dominion over, and had all but lost contact with. It was almost as if the shoe were on the other foot now.

Sarpanit made her way away from me, and I relaxed a bit longer, floating on my back and sitting on the floor of the pool to enjoy the sensations the water and the minerals, crystals, and whatnot it contained created on my skin. As I emerged from the water, my skin felt like it had been scrubbed clean. I tingled all over, and I doubt my hair had ever felt so luxuriously soft and fine.

I picked out a dark, forest-green outfit from the options available in my designated closet, along with black boots. After re-attaching the Gizmos on my forearms, I slung the cloak over my shoulders and followed some other Beings back to the Grand Hall.

The place was beginning to feel familiar to me, especially now that I was no longer a Mortal. I felt at ease and at home there in Ninkasi's Sacred Halls, but also felt like it was all a sham, like it wouldn't last. As I picked up a plate and began to browse through the many dining options available, I also began to ponder how to go about achieving the things I knew needed to be done, and tried not to think about possible consequences if I even attempted to do them. My loves, my Goddesses, needed some healing. Their pain was evident in their expressions. No matter how much they smiled and laughed or seemed to enjoy themselves, there was always a haunted look in their eyes, like they expected something horrible to happen at any moment, out of the blue. I had to do something to ease their suffering. Even if it cost me their affection. I was certain I would lose them both if I succeeded in my as-yet-undetermined efforts to help them heal. But, I love them both so much, how could I not take the chance(s)? I wiped away the tears starting to form in my eyes and ate something which tasted somewhat delicious. For some reason, this enhanced reality I was experiencing was beginning to lose its luster and become mundane.

Music, Dancing, and Story-telling

The third evening of the Hootenanny was the most formal of the week. There would be an actual, formal Ball, followed by more music and less-formal dancing, then about two hours before dawn, the Storytellers would set up a semi-circle of cushions and banquet tables for their audience's comfort, and begin to tell their tales.

It was actually a competition, and everyone in attendance had three marbles given to them. The attendees would award the Storytellers with their marbles – blue for a "thank you for the fine tale," red for "I enjoyed your story very much," and gold for "I will remember this tale always, and hope to hear more from you!"

Every decade or so, the Gold-winners would assemble to tell a new round of tales, and the winners would be declared "Imperial Bards." Which could lead to a gig in front of the Emperor himself.

I had too much on my mind to desire attending. Which was a shame, because I really wanted a chance to play some music again, and was interested in stories from my new stomping grounds. The dancing could wait until I was in an outdoor setting, underneath the stars.

I was sitting by myself near the foot of the Grand Stairway, absent-mindedly munching on some very delicious food which I paid little attention to, other than to casually load into my mouth now and then, trying to think of how to proceed with my new-found, self-appointed tasks; to help my loves get over the pain and trauma caused by Marduk.

Marduk is no one to be taken lightly. Not only because he is the mightiest of all the Immortals, but also because he had proven himself to be a wise and able Emperor during his brief time on the throne.

He was named Emperor for the duration of the time needed to prepare and enact the destruction of Tiamat. Afterward, he was expected to step aside to allow the previous Emperor, Anu, to reclaim the throne. *(I have mixed feelings about Anu. He has proven to be a bit of a jokester, though he has a few good qualities as a leader, too.)*

Well, when the time came for Marduk to step down, he decided that he enjoyed being Emperor very much, thank you, and he would just stay where he was seated.

To challenge a sitting Emperor for the throne, one has to wrestle him. (*Seriously, that's how they get down. It's kinda embarrassing, if you ask me.*)

And there Marduk was, seated on the throne – the mightiest of them all. There wasn't really much of a chance that anyone could unseat him.

In the era prior to, during, and immediately after Marduk's time on the throne, there was much Imperial business that needed discussion – one of the reasons why I have mixed feelings about Anu. Some of the urgent business which needed discussion was left over from Anu's predecessor, Alalu. As a matter of fact, the previous Emperor's inaction on one such matter was the main catalyst in Anu's decision to challenge Emperor Alalu for the throne.

I don't know the details, but their home planet's atmosphere had been somehow damaged, possibly by some technology the Ancients had devised. Or…well, no use speculating at this point in the story. No one knew what to do about the damage, and it was left to fester for thousands and thousands of years.

Finally, the fear of Tiamat overshadowed everything, and when three champions – including Enki, Marduk's father - had been sent along to throw down Tiamat and failed, Marduk volunteered to take up the challenge.
After his victory over Tiamat, the time came for Marduk to step down from the throne and allow Anu to continue his reign. Marduk ridiculed the former Emperor for failing to take care of the problem with the atmosphere. Still. Marduk didn't do any more than his predecessors had.

They had created colonies on Earth to extract gold, which they powderized and launched high into their home world's atmosphere, as a stop-gap measure to correct the atmosphere's apparent failings. This was originally done as a method to buy time, until a more permanent solution could be devised. A more permanent solution was never devised, though, and the Earth colonies became a source of wealth and debauchery for the colonists.

And I should interject here that it was mostly the House of Enlil – he and his sons Ninurta and Nergal – who profited from the debauchery alluded to earlier. In what is today called South America, they created establishments wherein off-world Beings could interact with Humans. In

any manner the off-worlders desired. The Humans could be used for sexual pleasure, tortured to death, torn to pieces, and eaten, if the off-worlder wanted. And not necessarily in that order. I'm more than a little certain this was considered to be illegal. But, the Earth was so remote – at times - and when they created Human/Immortal hybrids, that was seen as an abominable act. Even by the Emperor himself. Until he met one. (*Getting ahead of the story again…*)

Marduk was eventually coaxed into giving up the throne by being named as Anu's successor.

This really miffed Enlil and his house. Enlil was the legal heir to the throne, and the second-highest-ranked person in the Empire, even above his older half-brother Enki – the hero of a prior war between the Ancients and the Titans. Enki was considered to be the wisest of the Truly Ancients, and believed he should inherit the throne upon Anu's abdication. He was all but certain that his sons – including the mighty Marduk and the dutiful Dummuzi – would be able to defeat any uprising by Enlil's or any of the other Great Houses, if they took a stand against Enki's taking of the throne.

Now, things get really convoluted here.

Marduk was the anointed heir to the Emperor's Throne which his Grandfather, Anu, holds. Enlil, by the Ancient's Law, is the legal Heir. We are just going to leave out Enki's claim to the Throne, for brevity's sake.

After his defeat by Anu, former Emperor Alalu was worried he'd be assassinated to prevent him from trying to regain the Throne. Which was pure paranoia on his part.

There were legends about a planet with life and oceans, beyond what they referred to as the "Hammered Bracelet" - the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter. Alalu stole a vessel capable of inter-planetary travel and set off for Earth – named after Enki (who was called "Ea" in previous eras), who had allegedly lived here for a long while – so long, many of his people forgot about him - until he returned with tales of the unparalleled beauty he witnessed on Earth, as well as it's geological and climatic instability, which eventually caused him to depart from what was essentially his own domain, to return to his Homeland. It was apparently during his time on Earth that Ea – also known as Enki – became adept at genetic engineering, and/or shapeshifting. And when he came up with the idea to genetically engineer Marduk.

Enki warned against trying to cross the Hammered Bracelet, since the various sized-and-shaped rocks were too much of a hazard. Many of them were large enough to cause considerable damage to spacecraft. So, in order clear a path before him, Alalu took along some Forbidden Weapons. Their descriptions lead one to conclude that these weapons were similar to Nuclear Missiles. Alalu was able to blast his way through the Hammered Bracelet and found his way to Mars, where he searched for gold to use back in the Homeworld.

Alalu was not completely alone on his trip. He sent his trusted companions back to the Homeworld with a cargo hold full of gold. This was his contribution to solving the crisis with the Homeworld's atmosphere. If he were to return, he could easily have found support for his re-claiming of the throne. He was a hero, because there just wasn't enough gold in the Homeworld to fix the problem with the atmosphere.

Alalu had been grievously injured in the wrestling for the Throne. Mining Gold on Mars was no easy task, and before a relief ship could arrive to take Alalu home, along with the gold he mined since the first shipment, Alalu died, alone, on Mars.

The amount of gold Alalu's expedition provided could only help out with the problematic atmosphere for a short while – much more gold was needed.

Enki volunteered to take an expedition to Earth, and find gold there. His youngest son, Dummuzi, accompanied him, as part of the ship's crew, as well as his eldest daughter, Ninkasi.

So, things went slowly, but well enough that Enki was once again venerated as a Hero by his people. Lots of things happened over the years, including the genetic modification of what would become Human Beings, but what we're trying to focus on here is how Marduk fits into the story.

Back on the Homeworld, the Imperial Counsel was well-impressed with how they were able to negotiate a peaceful resolution to Marduk's refusal to step down from the throne - as agreed upon beforehand - once the crisis with Tiamat was over. They saw no further need to continue with succession-by-wrestling, and instead, Emperor Anu entrusted the Council with the task of determining succession.

Immediately, Enlil began to wail and moan about how Marduk had usurped his rightful claim as Anu's heir.

(*Marduk, back in the day, was not well-known for his ability to keep his temper in check. Quite the opposite – he was known as a hothead. He enjoyed knocking the heads clean off his rivals, or those who challenged or offended him. And he carried them around for a good long while, those severed heads, just to show people not to* ***FUCK*** *with him.*)

Eventually, people on the Counsel asked Marduk if there was *anything* he would settle for, other than the Emperor's Throne, so no one would have to listen to Enlil's whining anymore. And his son, Ninurta, who wailed the most and loudest. He was third in line for the Throne, with Enki being praised enough to make Ninurta fearful that Enki would be given the Emperorship, after his son became Emperor, and that Enlil would not raise a sufficient fuss over it to keep the Throne in Enlil's House in the future.

See how easily this gets confusing, right from the start?

So, Marduk agreed to give up his claim to the Throne, if he was given Earth as his own, independent domain. And off he went to Earth to take it over from his father.

Enki wasn't sure what to make of all this. He still desired the Imperial Throne for himself, after all. He took a vacation. Oddly enough, he and Ninurta – Enlil's oldest son and heir – were quite close in those days. He accompanied Enki.

After being named once again as the rightful Heir to the Emperor's Throne, Enlil took it upon himself to visit Earth. Enki was away at the time, and Marduk's claim on Earth hadn't been acknowledged by the Emperor yet, so Enlil – now seen as the rightful Heir to the Throne – began to throw his weight around, since he was the highest-ranked person on Earth.

Marduk decided to kick Enlil off Earth, and a war broke out. A cease-fire was quickly negotiated, and things became a bit more stable for a while, though there were numerous smaller wars between the lesser houses, as they began to jockey for position within a new, Earth-based realm. It was during this time that Inanna made significant gains in territories that venerated her. She always felt slighted, as she had been given lands far away from the major colonies – the spaceports and capitals of the others who came along in Enki's initial expedition.

So, let's just get with the highlights from there on –

Enki and Ninurta returned from wherever they went (the Moon? Mars? Most likely the Moon; it's associated with the one named Sin/Ninurta). And almost immediately set about creating Human Beings as slave labor for the Immortals, in order to take the burden of mining from the colonists.

Dummuzi and Enki were summoned to the Imperial Court to show the Emperor an example of these Humans. Anu was well impressed with the Human, and as they were dispatched back to Earth, Emperor Anu charged Dummuzi with the task of educating Humans in their duties as servants to the Immortals. They eventually took over the tasks of farming and herding as well, to provide food for themselves and their overlords. And so on, until the Immortals were left with a life of leisure, while Human labor provided everything they desired.

It took Enki and Ninurta a good while to perfect Humans. They couldn't make us fertile. Ninurta finally resolved that issue, by adding more of his own DNA to the mix, and the result was a fertile Human - the one taken away to show the Emperor.

Marduk made an official complaint to the Emperor, that Enlil acted like he owned the place, when Earth was supposed to be his (Marduk's) domain. So, the Emperor graciously allowed Marduk to claim Mars as his domain, and everyone was happy. Except for Marduk.

The Mars Colony, etc.

Mars was once a watery planet, much like Earth. But, that's another story. What matters now is that it was damaged and is currently not able to support much in the way of life. Or life as we know it.

As mentioned above, Alalu – the Emperor before Anu (the current one) – went to Mars to mine for gold to fix the atmosphere on his homeworld. (*Not sure why he chose Mars over Earth, except maybe it was the first one he came across and he was ready to get out and stretch his legs, so to speak? Maybe he didn't really believe in Enki's stories about a verdant, watery planet, beyond the Hammered Bracelet, and just decided that Mars was it? Who knows*?)

Now, long ago – I have no reference for when this occurred – there was an intergalactic war. The Empire which includes Earth (at times) was having a hard time of it, and prepared a last-ditch counter-offensive to throw its enemies back.

One of the subordinate bits of the Empire was a Galactic Power almost as powerful as the two factions at war. They were known as the Igigi. The Emperor charged this vassal entity with a special task – they were to use the turmoil of the planned counter-offensive as cover to sneak up on the enemy's homeworld and destroy it. They were given the okay to use forbidden (planet-destroying) weapons to do so. These people were a noble race, and chaffed at their order to completely annihilate a planet capable of supporting life, but they were also bound by treaty to do as the Empire commanded. So, they did.

As a result, the Empire won the war and peace would result for generations, as the Empire would be left as the sole super-power in the Galaxy. However, the crippled fleet of the enemy had no place to retreat, so they decided to go on a suicide run and destroy the homeworld of the people who used forbidden weapons to annihilate their own homeworld. Again, forbidden weapons were utilized, to great effect.

So, even though they had won the deciding battle of the war, the triumphant vassals of the Empire were left with no home of their own. The soldiers aboard their warships were the only survivors of their respective Races. As one could well imagine, they were sad in ways we cannot fathom. Although each and every one of them were given the elixir which grants long life, they would be the last of their kind. They segregated their military forces, and women were not allowed.

The Emperor could do little to make up for their loss. What he could do, though, was grant these vagabond survivors Mars for their new home. Under the rulership of Marduk. They would virtually be an independent world within the Empire, seeing as their space fleet was still strong enough to challenge the Empire for supremacy, and they would be under the rule of the formidable Marduk.

So, as one could imagine, the Igigi were not all THAT happy with the arrangement, and neither was Marduk. They were essentially banished to a sterile world, where there would be no women. But, at least they had a purpose to keep them busy – to mine Mars for gold.

Meanwhile, Marduk yearned to return to Earth and claim it for his own. It had been ceded to him once, before the Emperor reneged on his word and allowed Enlil to set up shop there, as if he owned the place. Anything to keep the peace back home.

See, this is why I find some wisdom in Anu's rule. He was understanding enough to want to keep any wars of succession away from his homeworld, and the actors in the squabbling far away. I'm not 100 percent certain of this, but I believe the atmosphere of the Empire's homeworld was damaged in the war, and possibly due to the utilization of forbidden technology. The Ancients do tend to gloss over their mistakes and concentrate on the present. Which, because of the prosperity provided by the Earth colonies, was a time of non-stop partying. Most of the subjects of his realm adored Anu for bringing such a time into being, after they had suffered through the battle with Tiamat and a nearly catastrophic war.

Marduk had actually been a better ruler, from what I understand, as he devoted his brief time on the Throne to problems leftover from the war, the damage done by their enemies, scattered rebellions, and the use of forbidden weapons. Dwelling on such things just brought everyone down, though. With Anu's rule re-established, celebrations and festivals took precedent over such wearying topics as correcting the damage done in a war that cost them dearly. No one wanted to be reminded about their roles in the catastrophes they caused – not when Earth contained enough gold to keep the atmosphere in good enough condition to keep the homeworld livable.

While we're on the topic of Anu's wisdom – he was satisfied enough with the Imperial Council's ability to negotiate truces between his feuding Houses, he had also decreed that the Imperial Council would decide matters of succession, rather than Succession by Wrestling. (*I mean... what the fuck?*)

Back to Mars: Marduk eventually came up with a scheme to snatch Earth out of the grasp of his rivals in the House of Enlil. He returned to Earth with much fanfare, and quickly announced his attention to wed a Human woman, Sarpanit.

Humans had already shown they were at least the equal of the Immortals, and they were deliberately prevented from learning how to read and write, or the techniques used to create things the Immortals used to reward Humans for their hard work.

Take beer, for example. Humans were not allowed to partake in the entire process of brewing beer. Of course, they provided most of the labor needed to grow the grains and make beer in batches large enough to supply the miners, the stonecutters, the farmers, the herdsmen, the weavers, the cooks, etc.

Still, each process along the way to brewing beer was segmented and the tasks divided amongst several helpers.

This is a great example of how we Humans are able to out-maneuver the Ancients.

The helpers eventually got together and pieced together the entire process, then created a song of praise to
Ninkasi, in which the entire process is elaborated, so as to allow Humans the ability to brew beer themselves. Of course, the Ancients were more focused on the flattery of having their names sung in hymns than they were worried about what the Humans attempted to accomplish with these hymns.

This is both one of the earliest and best examples of such coordinated activities meant to gain knowledge from our overlords which they were reluctant to share. Reading and writing are another. How to make the tools they used in their tasks were others.

Most of the male Ancients went about having their way with human women, and sometimes a right-smart, hybrid offspring would result. Almost every one of the Ancients who dwelt in their own Sacred City eventually had a favorite hybrid child, who they would teach how to read and write so as to have a scribe in their house. This would relieve the Immortal of tedious accounting tasks. And, of course, the human would eventually grow old and pass along the skill to one of his own offspring. Next thing you know, everyone’s writing a book!

In case you are interested, here’s the –

Hymn to Ninkasi

Borne of the flowing water,
Tenderly cared for by the Ninhursag,
Borne of the flowing water,
Tenderly cared for by the Ninhursag,

Having founded your town by the sacred lake,
She finished its great walls for you,
Ninkasi, having founded your town by the sacred lake,
She finished its walls for you,

Your father is Enki, Lord Nidimmud,
Your mother is Ninti, the queen of the sacred lake.
Ninkasi, your father is Enki, Lord Nidimmud,
Your mother is Ninti, the queen of the sacred lake.

You are the one who handles the dough [and] with a big shovel,
Mixing in a pit, the bappir with sweet aromatics,

Ninkasi, you are the one who handles the dough [and] with a big shovel,
Mixing in a pit, the bappir with [date] - honey,

You are the one who bakes the bappir in the big oven,
Puts in order the piles of hulled grains,
Ninkasi, you are the one who bakes the bappir in the big oven,
Puts in order the piles of hulled grains,

You are the one who waters the malt set on the ground,
The noble dogs keep away even the potentates,
Ninkasi, you are the one who waters the malt set on the ground,
The noble dogs keep away even the potentates,

You are the one who soaks the malt in a jar,
The waves rise, the waves fall.
Ninkasi, you are the one who soaks the malt in a jar,
The waves rise, the waves fall.

You are the one who spreads the cooked mash on large reed mats,
Coolness overcomes,
Ninkasi, you are the one who spreads the cooked mash on large reed mats,
Coolness overcomes,

You are the one who holds with both hands the great sweet wort,
Brewing [it] with honey [and] wine

(*from a fragmented section of the original tablet:*)

(You the sweet wort to the vessel)…
Ninkasi, (…)(You the sweet wort to the vessel)…

The filtering vat, which makes a pleasant sound,
You place appropriately on a large collector vat.
Ninkasi, the filtering vat, which makes a pleasant sound,
You place appropriately on a large collector vat.

When you pour out the filtered beer of the collector vat,
It is [like] the onrush of Tigris and Euphrates.
Ninkasi, you are the one who pours out the filtered beer of the collector vat,
It is [like] the onrush of Tigris and Euphrates.

(*The repetition in this poem is typical of songs in the Ancient world.*)

But, to get back to the story at hand…

Marduk chose Sarpanit to be his wife. She is a hybrid, though no one these days can agree on who her father is. She was chosen by Marduk because she was descended from Adapa – the first fertile Human, who was taken before Emperor Anu. This marriage essentially elevated Humans in status to be nearly the equal of the Ancients. Proto-humans had previously helped Marduk mop up the remnant rebellious forces from their close-to-catastrophic war, and had proven to be fierce warriors, which pretty much scared the daylights out of the Ancients. The last thing any of them wanted was to have a formidable enemy, led by Marduk.

Meanwhile, back on Mars, those tasked with mining for gold saw their ruler bolt for Earth without warning, and began to grumble amongst themselves. “If Earth women are good enough for the mighty Marduk,” their thoughts went, “they’re good enough for us!”

There weren’t many real warships on Earth, and the most powerful one was the private vessel of Inanna, who the Ancients adored so much, they had it built for her, on Earth. The vessel wasn’t primarily a warship – it was mostly a luxury space yacht, capable of interplanetary flight, flight in a planet’s atmosphere and its oceans - and could take off from and land on a planet’s surface. It also had a greater array of weapons than any other vessel here. Inanna is the prototypical Warrior Princess, and the Earthbound Ancients felt a little more secure there, since she could defend against any potential invaders. Or so they thought at the time.

This is such a convoluted story, and it just gets moreso at this point.

The Mars colonists had an entire fleet of warships. If they wanted to just go ahead and invade Earth to take as their new home, who could stop them? And they could readily shame Marduk because he had abandoned his post as their ruler. He could not fault them for leaving Mars, insomuch as he had done so himself.

To add to the mind-boggling potential of an Invasion from Mars by an enemy with overwhelming arms superiority, at a time when Marduk seemed ready to start a civil war - with the Human Race as his allies - something else happened to change the entire setup: Inanna fell in love.

Only a very short while before Marduk arrived back on Earth, his youngest brother, Dummuzi, returned from the Emperor’s palace. As a Being still considered a youngster, he missed his friends back home and wanted to visit and catch up with them. So, he volunteered to pilot one of the vessels which transported gold back to the Homeworld.

Prior to his departure back to Earth, he was put in charge of a fleet of ships to help bring larger hauls of gold back to the Empire’s Capitol Planet. In order to negotiate their way through the Hammered Bracelet, several warships were included in the fleet, with weapons powerful enough to blast their way through the asteroid belt. Along with his new role as Fleet Commander, Dummuzi was given a very stylish, new uniform.

Don’t laugh! These Immortals are way into fashion, moreso than we can actually imagine. Dummuzi’s uniform was created by the finest of tailors the Imperial Palace could provide, custom-fit and in colors that both flattered Dummuzi and attested to his status as a son of one of the two primary Great Houses of the realm, **and** his rank as Fleet Commander. I’m sure he looked formidable, strong, and way-the-fuck hot.

You don’t have to take my words to heart to understand this. All you have to know is – Inanna had one look at Dummuzi as he stepped out of his Flagship and flipped the fuck out. She was a Warrior Princess, you see, and not as much interested in romance as she was in combat. Until she saw Dummuzi that day. She apparently made somewhat of an ass of herself as she waded through the crowd around the landing platform to reach his side, and was tongue-tied by the time she stood before him.

As mentioned earlier, most of the Earth colonists were enamored of Inanna already, so somebeing saw her acting so awkwardly and immediately stepped up to introduce her to the dashing Fleet Commander.

I imagine that, soon as the introductions were made, Inanna recovered her composure enough to take Dummuzi by the hand, drape it over her arm and say something to the effect of “Great ship you got there, but it’s *nothing* compared to mine! Wanna see it?”

And off they went, only to emerge sometime later as the 2/3rds of the Sacred Lovers.

Ninkasi was not about to let Inanna just step up and make off with her dear, sweet brother – the one she hoped to marry one day. She joined them.

Well, the Human Race began to rejoice for real. Instead of girding themselves up for a potential civil war between the two Great Houses of Anu, they could relax and proclaim the first-born son of Inanna and Dummuzi to be their savior. Dummuzi was from the House of Enki, Inanna is from the House of Enlil. Their children would unite the two feuding Houses. There would be no more rivalry between different claimants to the Throne. Beings everywhere began to celebrate almost immediately.

Enlil’s oldest son – Ninurta/Sin - was not amused. Neither was Marduk. They seemed poised to take the Throne by force, and nothing – especially “Sacred Lovers” - would stand in their ways!

So, just as this transpired, something ***interesting*** happened – a fleet of warships arrived from Mars, and immediately seized the spaceports and main cities which supplied goods and services to the Empire, in addition to the ones which held the gold awaiting shipment.

See? This story just gets more baffling all the time.

I mean, who is the heir to the Imperial Throne at this point? Enlil seems to be more interested in seeing his eldest son on the throne than he desires it for himself. He might have taken a cue from Enki, his older half-brother, who decided he could be a power-behind-the-throne with Marduk seated there.

Enki considered Marduk’s claim to the throne as deserving of his Great House, and secretly planned to become co-ruler along with his mighty son, should the opportunity arise. It may have been during conversations about their co-reign that Marduk brought up his plan to eliminate his younger brother Dummuzi.

The Sacred Lovers were the Hope of the Human Race – a Princess and a Prince from each of the two Great Houses. The Emperor himself had charged Dummuzi with educating Humans in how to properly serve their Masters. As Dummuzi grew along with his charges, many Great Kings rose from our ranks to become almost the equal of the Immortals. All we lacked was their lifespan. It was shocking to the Immortals to find out how mighty Humans could become in our brief lifetimes. There were Human lands ruled over by Kings who were actually wealthier than all but a few of the Immortals, and armies from Human-dominated lands could overwhelm most of the Ancient’s cities. This did not concern the Houses of Enki and Enlil, who could rely on overwhelming air superiority to defeat any Terran-based armies.

But, all wisdom and hope for a peaceful future for everybeing could only advocate for an Earth ruled by Inanna and Dummuzi’s not-even-conceived son. (*And – just so you truly understand how jumbled-all-to-hell this situation was – if Ninkasi and Dummuzi had children,* ***their*** *children would out-rank Innana and Dummuzi’s children, as heirs to any Throne*.)

And then, these homeless soldiers show up, just to throw everything into a blender and shred any and all possibilities to bits.

And let's be clear here – Emperor Anu is going to have a major headache, as he struggles to figure out a course to follow which will not lead to disaster for the entire realm.

The mutinous forces from Mars have the largest fleet of warships in the Empire at this point. The Empire would not likely be able to defeat them, if they chose to attack the Empire's Homeworld. The Empire's warships are scattered across its domain, busy making sure there are no leftovers from the defeated rebellion, nor from the Titans who may be still sympathetic of Tiamat, and hungry for vengeance.

Just as I mentioned earlier, when Marduk tried to shoo his erstwhile minions back to Mars, they shamed him by reminding Marduk that it was HIS idea to abandon the mining colony, and take an Earth woman for his wife.

The mutineers eventually convinced Marduk they were tired of their labors, tired of being "good soldiers" for the realm, and just wanted to get on with being married and raising families.

They also pledged to support him as the Supreme Ruler of Earth. Provided he allowed them to stay. As for Marduk, he had been, upon his return from Mars, willing to settle on having Earth as his own realm. But, with a fleet of warships at his disposal, along with their battle-tested crews, the Imperial Throne was now well within his grasp.

As for Dummuzi, and Inanna – they were joined by Ninkasi, who expected one day to wed her dear brother. The three of them just wanted to travel around, see the sights, make love, and spread prosperity to every corner of the Earth. They went to the deserts: flowers bloomed and water flowed. They went to the wild lands and began to both teach the feral Humans the ways of civilization, and also to learn from them how dwell there without making a mess of everything. Mostly, though, they focused their energies on making lots and lots of love. They paid no attention to politics and wars and rumors of wars, the three of them were merrily involved in finding ways for the three of them to be ecstatically in love and happy.

Here's where I lose a lot of respect for Enki and his mighty son, Marduk.

Marduk decided to just go ahead and kill his younger brother. This was not at all unusual. When somebeing stands in close proximity to the Throne, they often think it's a good idea to get rid of potential rivals from their own House.

But, we Humans adored Dummuzi – we hailed him as "the Good Shepherd," the great and benevolent teacher of mankind. He dwelt amongst us for most of his time on Earth. He was really hands-on with the help, rather than dwelling in Sacred Cities within a Royal Palace Court. All the other Immortals were aloof and caught up in the formalities of such Courts. Dummuzi, Ninkasi, and Inanna would party with us out in the woods and prairies. Apparently, it took a minute for Inanna to get over her aversion to hanging out with Humans. But, what can one say? She was smitten and just wanted to be with her Love.

Dummuzi was often busy with his duties as educator of mankind and would go off by himself to domesticate some beast thought to be of value to the Ancients, or to domesticate a plant of some sort for the same reason. He also cultivated marijuana. We LOVED him!

Enki did nothing to dissuade Marduk from killing his brother – who had made such a splendid impression on the Emperor.

Marduk set upon his brother as he traveled by himself.

Something one should know about Dummuzi at this point: He may not have been genetically manufactured to be powerful, like his older brother, but outdoor living had done him well. He was a mighty Being, too. He fought off his brother's attack and fled, in the hope Marduk would understand that he had no ambitions for the Imperial Throne, nor for rulership over the Earth. He also asked his father to talk some sense into Marduk, so he – Dummuzi – could get back to his loving wives.

Enki took a vacation at this point in the story, and the rest of Dummuzi's life was spent in flight from his brother, from one part of the world to the other. In the art of this era, Dummuzi is depicted as a semi-feral vagabond, who wore only a leopard pelt and wielded a huge club.

His wives constantly searched for him, but he fled from them. He didn't want them to be killed along with him if they were found together by Marduk.

Up until this point, I had been very sympathetic to Marduk. He had been promised so many times to have a domain of his own, but something or somebeing came along every time to unseat him. Still, his desire to kill the ONE Immortal who lived alongside and loved the Human Race was just too much for me.

After he finally succeeded in killing Dummuzi, a horrible civil war broke out between the two Great Houses of Anu. Also, Inanna lost her mind to grief. She personally slaughtered many of Sin's demigod offspring, and many more of Marduk's minions. Her raging form is commemorated as Black Kali in India. Furthermore, she demanded to her father, Enlil, and her grandfather, Emperor Anu, that Marduk be executed.

Marduk lost the civil war he started. He was certain of his ability to defeat the House of Enlil on his own. However – Ninurta isn't known by his name "Sin" for no reason, nor is it a misnomer that "sin" is equated with the breaking of taboos. Ninurta has always pushed the limits. He added more of his own DNA to the failed attempts to make Humans fertile, for instance – against the sound advice of his mentor Enki. In the war against Marduk, he used forbidden technics and weapons. Which caught Marduk off-guard.

Not content to defeat Marduk, Sin also laid waste to the lands where the Sacred Lovers were venerated.

Apparently, he desired the Earth as his own domain, once his father obtained the Imperial throne.

The forbidden techniques and weapons so completely obliterated the cultures, Peoples, and lands dear to the Sacred Lovers, very few traces of them remained. There was not enough left for future generations to understand what they had lost. For a few generations, at least, the Human Race remembered. And Mourned.

I was - literally - born to set all these things aright.

Getting a Grip on Night Three

I summoned Zoe and asked her to let my wives know I wanted some time alone, but would return shortly - not likely until sometime tomorrow. Zoe seemed concerned.

"This experience has been a bit much for me to...I dunno...come to grips with...?" I explained. "Besides, I have no idea about formal Ballroom dancing."

"Is that really all that's going on?" she asked.

"Not that it's any of your business, but yes - as things stand now, it is." Zoe looked like she was going to cry.

"Zoe...?" I began to ask.

"Don't leave us now!" she blurted out, and fell to her knees, her head bowed. Tears began to drip from her face to the floor.

"Darling Zoe, believe me - my old life was never this exciting, nor as wonderful. I have no desire to leave, run away, hide, or escape," I explained.

"We need you!" Zoe said, and sniffled a little. "Especially Chloe."

"Umm...and...just..?" I couldn't think of the right question to ask.

"Our species..." Zoe began to hesitantly explain. "We females have this…reaction...to strong males," she told the ground beneath her. "So, when you slapped her and started giving us commands...she...well...you are the only male who's ever talked to us like that - at least since we've arrived in Ninkasi's Halls." Zoe finally looked up. "Chloe has bonded with you. She belongs to YOU now - heart, mind, body, and soul."

I wasn't sure how to take this information. I needed a drink. "Zoe, just what does this mean to me? I mean...well...my dance card is pretty full, if you take my meaning."

"That doesn't matter. You've become the dominant male in her life, and she has bonded to you. She can't help it - it's in our DNA. It's just how we are!" Zoe turned her head slightly, to look at nothing in particular. "Eventually,
I'll bond with you, too," she said quietly. Then regained her usual speaking voice.

"When you struck Chloe, it scrabbled her brains and she got an infusion of the hormones that cause us to bond to our..." - her voice was suddenly a whisper again - "...our mates."

She rose to her feet and turned away from me. I thought she was about to leave, but she remained there, to await my comments or commands, and wipe tears from her face. I cleared my throat. "Zoe, I'll need a drink. Is there any beer available that doesn't have some cockamamie side effects?"

"Not on your life, mister!" She turned halfway toward me and gave me an impish grin. She looked quite fetching.

"Well, then...I'll leave it to you to bring something strong and tasty, and hopefully with no side effects that might

cause me harm tonight."

"Be right back!" she perked up and pivoted away, stepped into the clouds and reappeared almost immediately. "Here," she handed me a bottle with one hand, and a glass with the other. "I decided that maybe tonight we shouldn't take unnecessary risks with you, so I brought you some delicious Brandy. I hope you don't mind."

"Zoe, you are a living doll! Thanks so much." I reached for the offerings.

“It gives me great pleasure to serve you well, m'lord," she said, her eyes a-glow.

"I need time to ponder my fate and future here, Zoe,” I told her. “I do not wish to be disturbed, and I’ll be in much better shape tomorrow, I’m sure. Please return to your duties now, and ask everyone to leave me alone, in the kindest way you can manage."

"Yes, m'lord!" she turned and departed. But returned almost immediately. Again. “I have a message for you, from Marduk.”

She handed me a card. I thanked her as she departed.

"Clouds!" I called aloud, "Get me to my bedroom."

Upon arrival, I made myself comfortable in the bed, with a glass half-full and the bottle of extremely wonderful, old brandy within reaching distance. I’d normally want a book to keep me company at a time like this, but I closed my eyes, let my back sink into the pillows I’d piled up at the head of the bed, and closed my eyes, the glass of brandy at rest on my belly, both hands around it.

Things had been a bit overwhelming for me since I arrived here. I needed time to sort out what was happening and figure out how I fit into this realm. I let my mind drift a bit and sipped at the brandy.

After a while, I felt someone climb into the bed with me and tug at the glass of brandy until it came free.

I was a little disappointed and a little pleased to have some company. I opened my eyes to discover Autonomia – who’s insistence that she become another concubine/daughter to me was one of the topics I wished to think about that evening.

“Hello, dear,” I tried to casually greet her. “You’re naked!” I couldn’t help but observe.

“You are, too!” She tried not to sound too excited about it and sipped at the Brandy.

We sat quietly for a while, and she nuzzled her way under one of my arms. She always smells so nice. I rested my
face atop her head.

“You need to either dismiss Savannah as your concubine or take me as a concubine, too.” She informed me.

“I just don’t get the daughter/concubine thing…” I pondered aloud.

“You are married to two of the sexiest Goddesses, ever!” she reminded me. “And your future…” she shook her head.

“Just because we’re your daughters doesn’t mean we don’t deserve to have you as a lover.” She took a deep draw from her glass. “I bet we love you more than any of those Others do!”

I couldn’t really argue with her. I wasn’t in the mood for any such confrontation at the moment. We sat in silence for a while. She took another sip of the Brandy.

“Ummm,” she cooed. “I enjoy Brandy so much…it gives me a warm, pleasant feeling inside…”

I took the glass from her hand and refilled it almost to the top, handed it back to her, then set the bottle on my stomach.

“…just like you!” she finished her thought.

I was not amused. She implied that we were already lovers. I had no such memories. I’d remember, I’m sure.

“Since when have we…” I began to ask. She cut me off.

“How about you close your eyes?” she requested as she pried the Brandy out of my hands. She set it down beside her glass.

“Just relax,” she instructed me, “and close your eyes.”

I could feel her body heat as she hovered above me. I felt her moving around on the bed a bit, but I dutifully kept my eyes closed. She leaned forward and very lightly kissed my temples. She allowed her breasts to just scarcely glide over my shoulders and chest. She continued teasing me like that for a few seconds, then I felt her gently straddle my hips and begin to take me into her. It was like nothing…I’d…ever…

“**Hey!**” I suddenly realized. “That was YOU?!?” I was all but completely dumbstruck.

“Yup!” she chirped as she settled onto me and slid her arms behind my shoulders. Her face came to rest along my neck.

“Mmmm…” she slightly moaned as she shook all over.

I’d had similar experiences before, but always considered them to be sweet, sexy dreams.

I could not see anyone present back then, for one thing. And I could scarcely feel anyone else’s presence, until she took me in. After the first such incident, I’d just relax and surrender to the moment.

“Ummm,” she cooed into an ear. “You’re my favorite lover! It’s always so intimate with you, so lovingly sweet!” She took another deep breath and shuddered again. I reluctantly gave myself over to the encounter and
immediately came.

Autonomia squealed and kicked her feet up and down a little before she settled down and let her weight rest on me.

“I always thought that was your mother’s doing…” I began to explain.

“Hush!” she scolded me. “Don’t think of other women when we’re alone like this.”

“My bad!” I apologized, somewhat.

“I can’t really think of any reason for not having you as a concubine, considering we’ve already been lovers,” I eventually realized.

“There’s a good man!” she congratulated me.

“Darling,” I further elucidated, “my personal stance on such matters has been, is now, and always will be – give the Goddess what she wants.” Then rolled over on top of her. She was totally right. Being with her was more sweetly intimate than anything I’d ever experienced. We really love one another a lot. And I mean very, VERY much.

It was also much more satisfying than anything I’d ever experienced. It wasn’t long – comparatively thinking – before I tumbled off her and settled into the bed to drift off to sleep.

When I awoke, I was disoriented for a few seconds, before I remembered where I was. I was in a cuddly mood, though, and was let down to find I was alone again.

My mind returned to the topics I’d wanted to ponder overnight. What to do about Chloe was another. I mean, she’s so agreeable, so pretty, so sweet…and she’s bonded to me, as if I were her mate. And – she’s an alien species, not really like either Humans, nor the Ancients. But the thought of her in life-long, unrequited love was too much for me to bear. She’ wonderful, I adore her, and she deserves better.

I heaved a huge sigh. “Clouds!” I instructed. “Bring Chloe here. I want her to join me in the shower.” I pushed the pile of blankets on my bed aside and made my way to the shower stall.

“I’m such a man-whore…” I realized.

(*Sorry, but I’m not going to relate what transpired when she joined me. She was very happy, and* ***extremely*** *excited. Her and her sister are Aliens. They don’t react in ways that necessarily make sense to Humans. Or they do, but extremely exaggeratedly. And their anatomies are just slightly – for the most part – different from ours. It was strange. But pleasurable. Not something I would seek out on my own. And, she became so docile and lovey-dovey when we cuddled afterwards. She didn’t fuss or hesitate when I dismissed her. I had more things to mull over, and she was completely understanding. All in all – it was weird, but sweet. I don’t know how much more of that I really desire, which is okay – she shares a bed with her sister and Tim, so she won’t be totally lonely without my attentions.*)

After she disappeared into the clouds, I remembered the note Zoe had given me.

The card informed me that Marduk and his household would be departing after the preceding evening’s formal ball, and Sarpanit and he would enjoy my company as they began their trip back to his Sacred City, Babylon. “How serendipitous!” I thought, and got myself dressed. “I guess I should give him fair warning.”

I had no idea how he was going to react when I told him about my plans to resurrect his little, dead brother. I wanted to continue to be on his good side, though. What I had to say was mostly speculation, but I could find out the actual facts with the help of Nabu. I’m sure he can find out the information I need, if he doesn’t already know. I returned to Ninkasi…no, to OUR bed chamber…to pack some clothes for the trip. I supposed we would take some sort of flying vessel toward Babylon, then set up a camp outside its walls for us visitors.

C’mon – don’t laugh! This camp would be Marduk’s personal, Traveling Royal Palace, and would feature amenities enough to make Fitness Centers, Resorts, Public Hotsprings, Five-star Restaurants and Hotels, Concert Halls, and Sports Facilities all hide their faces and blush in shame, figuratively thinking. I looked forward to spending as much time with Marduk in his Sacred City for as long as he would tolerate me.

Nabu – the Lord of Wisdom and Learning

I went to the bedroom I share with my wives to pack a few things for the journey. (*I feel as if I’m rubbing it in at this point, but…it still kinda feels undeserved to me…*)

Tim was already there and looked to be packing some of my belongings into a wardrobe. “I beg your leave, My Lord!” he seemed to be embarrassed, clutched a hand to his chest, and bowed his head. Savannah entered the room, from the door that led into a hallway. (*How quaint!*)

“I’ve asked Tim to help us pack for the journey,” she informed me. Very unhelpfully. At least Tim appreciated her words. He immediately looked relieved and resumed packing.

“Darlin’…” I began to ask. She cut me off.

“Zoe tells me everything,” Savannah educated me. “Especially when she’s worried about you.” She shook her head slightly, in wonder. “There’s something about you that makes women want to take care of you,” she said, “and love you.”

“It’s because I’m so cute,” I informed her. She rolled her eyes.

“Seriously, babe,” I insisted. “it’s been a blessing and a curse my whole existence.”

“I asked Sarpanit, and she told me we would be riding part way,” Savannah further illuminated. “And that we would have private compartments in the Royal Coach.” Savannah instructed a servant - who followed her into the bedroom and pulled a rolling rack with my concubine’s clothes and various accessories hanging from it - to pack her things into a trunk, which fit neatly into the bottom of the wardrobe.

“I think you need a wardrobe of your own,” I appraised her dangling clothing. Zoe immediately entered from out

of some clouds, with an empty wardrobe on a hand truck.

“I totally agree,” she told us. “I mean, you’re going to Babylon – you’re certain to acquire more things while there!”

“Zoe!” I admonished her, “I’m not sure how I feel about you knowing so much about what I’m doing, where I’m going and so forth.”

“Don’t worry about it!” She scolded me. “Everyone just wants what’s best for you!”

“And **I** want to be the one who decides what’s best for me!” I said, a little miffed.

Savannah and Zoe looked at one another and laughed. I was none too pleased, but decided I’d just have to get used to it. Freakin’ Goddesses…and their surly servants…

“Clouds!” I called aloud, “Take me to where Marduk’s party is preparing to leave.” Savannah hustled over, leapt to my side, and took my hand.

“Me, too!” she called.

We were set down on the outskirts of Ninkasi’s Sacred Hall. There was a huge column being assembled. Livestock, wagons, mounted soldiers, and several coaches. One, towards the front of the caravan, was huge, compared to the rest. I assumed it was the Royal Coach and we began to make our way there, Savannah’s hand still in mine.

Marduk was shouting orders to his staff. He rode a magnificent horse – a black Shire. At 7’4” tall, it was difficult for him to find a suitable mount. Shires are notably huge, and lovely. Marduk’s horse, for instance, is jet black, with high, white, fluffy socks, and a fluffy black mane and tail. He also has a white star on his nose. He stands six feet, nine inches at the shoulders, and his head is around half-a-foot above Marduk’s when they stand side-by-side. Marduk looks the part of a Mighty God/Emperor while seated upon his mount.

He was busy giving orders to various servants when he saw us approach. He began to trot his horse over to us, while he kept an eye on his servants and shouted additional instructions. When he was closer, he hailed us.

“Gaian!” he bellowed, “How good to see you! I take it you have decided to take a break from Ninkasi’s zaniness and make a quick trip to Babylon!”

“Hail, Marduk!” I shouted back. “I do, indeed, need a break from the Hootenanny! And it seems Lady Savannah has decided to accompany me.

“Though, as Wizard of the Everywhen, it matters not how long or brief a visit I make to your Sacred City!”

“Ha!” he snorted. “Your arrival could not be more well-timed.” He pointed behind us. “Here comes my son, Nabu, with the first of many gifts sure to come your way on this journey.”

“How fortuitous,” I thought, “just the man I wanted to meet!”

Nabu is the Lord of Wisdom and Learning. He is known as “the Undefeatable,” with just cause. He never instigates a battle he cannot win. If taken by surprise – which is all but impossible – he’ll avoid the enemy until the tides have shifted, the planets aligned correctly, etc. Then annihilate his enemy. He’s a master of timing, and at reading signs of changes in fortune or momentum. These things have their cycles, so he’ll just avoid a direct clash with the enemy until he likes the conditions much better. He’s also wise enough to know when to just go ahead and get things over with. He’ll make a rousing, brief speech to his soldiers, turn his black

Arabian around and charge, sword aloft, directly towards the enemy's ranks. He rarely behaves in such a manner. He rarely leads charges. He prefers his Generals to lead the fights, so the soldiers know to trust in and believe in them. When he leads the charge, his troops rush to be by his side in battle.

Nabu, when faced with an overwhelmingly larger force, would play the long game with them. He'd retreat, then sneak around them to capture their supply wagons. This is how most of the plunder his rank-and-file attains is gotten. On truly lucky campaigns, the opposing army will have sacked and looted a city or two along the way, and the rewards are much greater: statues and household items made of gold and silver. Jewelry. And so on.

Nabu would then travel further along the path the invaders took to begin their approach to the motherland between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Once passed the trail of carnage the invader's forces left behind, he'd begin to encounter those who supplied the army, which usually meant he'd crossed into **their** homeland. Instead of putting everything to the torch, he would convince the merchants, farmers, and craftsmen, and so forth, that they would do well to become **his** suppliers.

"The people do not have to suffer, just because armies do battle!" he'd exclaim. "Continue to prosper, under my father's regime!"

That's just genius on so many levels: The people are relieved they are not about to be massacred; Most of them would not believe Royalty could be so compassionate to them. He'd win the people over, and find valuable – and loyal - trading partners for Babylon. And knowing that Nabu was taking his time to destroy the enemy army would usually seal the deal.

He'd retrace their path and annihilate the starving, depleted enemy forces. He never took prisoners.

I looked in the direction Marduk pointed and saw his son riding towards us on a fine, black Arabian. He was nowhere nearly as tall as his father, but a robust figure nonetheless, who easily stood six feet, six inches tall. He looked much taller in the saddle. He towed two mounts behind him – a Palomino New Forest Pony and a Quarter Horse Paint. The pony had golden fur and a blonde mane and tail. He also had white socks. The Paint was mostly black, with white socks and splashes of white across her face and across her back and sides, and one upon her chest. The splash around her face surrounded her black ears, with a little black base below them. That's known as a "magic hat." I had a magic horse! Fittingly enough. Indigenous American Horse-People prized such horses and ponies. A white splash across the chest was thought to bring protection in battle. The "magic hat" didn't have any specific attributes, its medicine varied according to the animal's character, and its interactions with its owner, or someone it felt unusually close to.

"Nabu," Marduk called out. "Come, meet our guests!" He reined his horse around and it began to run off somewhere the King foresaw some problem arising. "Please pardon me," he shouted back to us as he rode away. "I'll join you later, after the caravan gets along its way!"

Nabu jumped off his horse as it came to a halt a few paces ahead of us.

"Greetings!" he hailed us, "I am Nabu, Marduk's eldest son and heir!" he told us with not a little pride in his voice.

I reached over to him and clasped his wrist with one hand. He did likewise, and we patted one another on the shoulders.

“Just the person I wanted to meet!” I informed him. “I am Gaian, Wizard of the Everywhen,” I introduced myself,

then continued: “Allow me to present my traveling Companion, Lady Savannah!” I said, and released her hand so she could shake his. Rather than shake her hand, he raised it to his face and kissed her fingers. She looked quite bemused. He looked somewhat perplexed.

“The dead one?” he asked, taken aback. I immediately gave Savannah a little shove, so she fell against him.

“Does she ***feel*** dead to you?” I asked. Savannah blushed. I pulled her back to my side and put an arm around her waist.

Nabu had reflexively reached out to steady her and held her upper arms with his hands. He gave her a squeeze or two before releasing her. “Amazing!” he appraised her. “In our realm, several attempts have been made to bring those who’ve passed on back to their former selves, but they’ve mostly been catastrophic.

“I have so many questions for you both, but that can wait until later, when we’re underway,” he told us. “As father may have informed you, I have gifts for you and your lovely companion!”

He walked over to his mount and untied the reins to the ones he towed from their moorings on his saddle. He strode back to stand before us.

“This one is for you,” he held out a set of reins to Savannah, “and this one for you, Lord Gaian.” He handed me the reins to the Paint.

“It’s beautiful!” Savannah squealed, as she trotted over to pat her pony’s neck.

“He is, indeed!” I informed her. She hugged her gift around his neck.

“How do you know it’s a boy,” she asked, before she examined him to discover the answer for herself.

“Freakin’ fireballs!” she exclaimed.

“And he likes you!” Nabu said as the two of us laughed. Savannah blushed for real now.

I took the reins to the Paint and approached her slowly. “Hello, girl,” I cooed toward her. “Aren’t you a sight?” I slowly raised my hand to gently stroke her neck and pat it a few times.

I looked to Nabu. “What an even-tempered girl!”

“You have a knack for handling horses!” he said in admiration, spiced with astonishment.

“Please,” I said in reply. “I’m from Tejas. I even worked on a ranch, as a youngster.”

I continued, “And we’re going to get along well, aren’t we, girl?” She nodded her head and gave a snort. We all laughed.

“It’s like she understands you!” Savannah marveled.

“I’m fairly certain they do,” I answered. The pony gave a snort and pawed the ground with one of his front hooves. Nabu and I laughed again.

Savannah was amazed. “Can we really keep them?” she asked me.

“It would be an insult to our host to refuse such fine gifts,” I explained to her. “And they are just too splendid!”

I added, “Horses need a lot of care and attention. And we’ll have to have stables built for them.”

“Come,” Nabu offered, “Let me help you gain your seat!” He took the reins from Savanah’s hands.

Before he could put his hands on her waist to give her a lift, I called over to her, “Darlin’, put your right foot into the lower stirrup, then step up to place your other foot into the higher stirrup.”

Nabu gave her a slight lift, and she found her seat, but it was clearly awkward for her.

“The higher horn is to enable you to hold onto while running or jumping. The other one is mostly to keep you centered on your saddle. Your spine should align with his.” I instructed her.

“I think it’s too complicated!” Savannah said, while looking the saddle over. “I think I’d prefer one like yours.”

“Give a it a try, you may get to like it,” I advised her. “Besides, a saddle like mine can cause your thighs to sweat.” Savannah’s face scrunched up at the thought. So freakin’ cute.

I hadn’t really thought of it this way, but Savannah could well be thought of as “damaged goods” by many of the Immortals. Not that I cared, really. I know who she is, and appreciate her. I took a glance her way. Mounted on a gold-colored horse, her skin looked like gold, too. “Just breathtaking,” I sighed under my breath and shook my head.

Nabu had recovered his mount by this time and was looking around to see if anything needed his attention. Satisfied to see his father had things well in hand, he pointed to a nearby hillock.

“At the top of that rise, you’ll find the Royal Carriage. You’ll know it by its size.” He laughed and shook his head. “Father has to do everything Big Time!”

I rode over to him. “I’d welcome the chance to chat with you – the two of us.”

“I have many things to discuss with you as well.” He eyed me sideways. “You are very, intriguingly interesting.”

I may have blushed a little.

“Perhaps we could take a late ride, before turning in for the night,” he suggested.

“I would welcome any opportunity to spend time in the saddle,” I told him. “If I haven’t thanked you already, I beg your forgiveness and thank you profusely.

“Since I’ve arrived in this realm, things keep happening that take me by surprise.” I further explained: “But to be returned to the saddle, after all these years – it’s a blessing! I thank you once again, Prince Nabu!”

When Nabu was well on his way to wherever it was he rode off to, I called over to Savannah; “Hey, babe! Let’s run up to the head of the caravan.”

“How do I get him to…like…go?” she asked.

“Give him a gentle kick with your heels, and he’ll run off!” I said.

“Will it hurt him?” she asked. She’s just too sweet!

“Not anywhere nearly as much as it would if you were wearing spurs,” I informed her. He nodded and snorted at that.

She gave him the slightest of nudges, and he began to trot. Trotting tends to be fairly difficult for inexperienced riders. One tends to bounce a lot. It can hurt, even.

“You’ll have to do better than that!” I berated her.

As soon as she became a little more settled onto the saddle, she kicked her pony a little harder, and he took off like a shot. She started to scream, but it morphed into laughter as she adjusted to her pony’s gait. New Forest ponies, like many ponies, are renowned for their smooth ride.

“Let’s go,” I said, and gave my horse a little nudge, while I leaned forward and held her reins up so that my hand was just a little behind her ears. Or, where her ears had been. Almost from the start, she was splayed out, her head forward, her legs stretching far ahead. Just so, so fast!

“Dad, what’s wrong with him?” Savannah shouted to me as we began to pull up behind her. Her pony was trying to run, but kept tossing his head up.

“You’ve got too tight a grip on his reins,” I criticized her. “Just hold them forward, give them some slack.” Soon as she did, he picked up speed. He wasn’t thinking about letting my horse pass him.

Well, she wasn’t about to be shown up by this youngster, so she picked up speed, too. She left them in our dust.

“Okay,” I called back to Savannah, “Now pull the reins back gently and give him a command, like ‘Whoa!’”

She did as I suggested, and her horse slowed to a trot, then began to walk.

My horse slowed to a walk and allowed them to catch up to us, then matched the pony’s gait. Without me having to instruct her. Magic horse, indeed!

“Give your pony a pat on the neck and praise him,” I recommended.

“That’s a *good* boy!” she lilted. He gave his head a high nod and strutted for a few paces. Savannah laughed aloud. She was enchanted, no doubt.

“Does the saddle make more sense now?” I asked.

“Yes, it does,” she responded. “I may still want to give other types of saddles a try, though. This one is complicated.”

The Caravan

We were still a little ways away from the Royal Carriage. It dominated the hilltop. It’s huge! It has four wheels across the back. Four, huge freakin’ wheels, easily half-again as tall as the other coaches had, and about five times as wide. The thing’s almost the size of a sailing ship. As we rode up from behind, Nabu suddenly appeared in front of it.

“Just wait there until we give three conch calls!” he shouted to some unseen Others. “I’ll make a long call to give you notice beforehand.” He finished, then leapt from his horses’ back onto the sand.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, “you found us!”

“Dad!” Savannah hurriedly inquired, “What are our horses’ names?”

“Nabu!” I conveyed to the Prince, “Savannah wants to know what our mounts are called!”

“These were chosen from stables in Persia!” he told us. “As far as I know, they’ve only been called ‘Boy,’ and ‘Girl.’”

“Well, then,” I cajoled my concubine, “I think it’s time they are christened with proper names. Go ahead and chose one for your pony!”

“I think he’s grand, like royalty!” she declared. “What are some titles for noblemen?”

“Count!” I offered, “Viceroy!”

“Duke!” Nabu chimed in. “Baron!”

“Ooo! I like that one!” she cooed towards us. “Baron Struts! Just Baron, for short!

“Is that to your liking, boy?” she leaned forward and cooed into his ear. Of course, he nodded his head and strutted a few paces.

“Perfect!” I laughed. Nabu laughed as well. Those two are just too charming together!

“And a magic horse requires a name that reflects her uniquity,” I proclaimed, rather pompously. “Something…mystical.” I shrugged my shoulders. “Mysti!” She bobbed her head about for a few seconds.

“I believe she likes it!” Nabu evaluated her response.

“Mysti it is, then!” I decided.

Nabu walked over to take hold of Savannah’s pony’s reins. “Here,” he offered, “I’ll tether your pony to the rear of the coach, and help you dismount.” He was clearly infatuated with Savannah. Or, fascinated at the very least. She did as he said, and dropped from the saddle and into his grasp. He spun her halfway around and set her down in some soft sand.

“You are just amazing – and I don’t mean ‘for a dead girl.’” He blurted out.

She lowered her face a little, gave her head a slight tilt, and notified him: “I’m. Not. Dead.”

He laughed a bit too much for her comfort. I’d dismounted and walked over to the mooring where Nabu had tied her pony’s reins and did likewise for my horse.

Nabu dropped his Arabian’s reins and walked over to a recess in the side of the carriage. He reached up to pull a small set of wooden stairs down, and motioned for us to ascend.

I walked ahead to step up and open the door where the stairs ended, and reached a hand down for Savannah to grasp.

I stepped into the doorway as she arrived and entered a ridiculously huge room, considering it was in the center of an ox-drawn vehicle.

As Nabu entered, he called aloud “Mother! Your guests have arrived!”

A door to the left and behind the thrones at the center of the forward wall opened, and Sarpanit, Goddess/Empress of Babylon, entered, wiping sleep from her eyes. Savannah and I bowed our heads and clutched a fist to our chests.

“Your Highness!” we saluted.

“Oh, please!” she upbraided us, “You are amongst friends!” She grasped my upper arms, pulled me close, and planted kisses on both my cheeks.

“There’s no need for formality when we are in private quarters.” She unhanded me and grasped Savannah to exchange greeting kisses with her, and took a seat on her throne, while she pointed out the large, stuffed sofa behind us. As she sat, her son gave her a peck on the cheek, as she did his.

Everything in the main room was covered in deep, purple, crushed velvet - with light-colored wood frames showing around the edges. From the edges of the windows and doorways as well. Two black velvet cords dangled from the ceiling, on either side of the thrones. I’d describe the thrones as “small” but…did I mention that Marduk stands seven feet, six inches tall? No piece of furniture capable of supporting his massive frame and bulk could be classified as “small.”

And Sarpanit's throne was definitely overbuilt, so she didn't look like a pretty little dollie by his side.

Before anyone had a chance to say anything, the main door swung open and Marduk called to us: "Take your seats and hold on, everyone! We're about to get underway." The door slammed shut.

Nabu reached above his head and tugged on a chain suspended from the ceiling. A ladder swung down. It clacked into place and he climbed up, opened a trap door above, and disappeared into the night sky. Sarpanit rose from her throne and settled onto the sofa between my concubine and myself.

"I do not enjoy the feeling of being thrown forward in my seat," she explained. "I prefer to face forward, so I don't wind up toppling to the floor."

"We haven't even started yet, and it's been marvelously fascinating already," Savannah appraised. Sarpanit chuckled a little.

"I'd have to agree," I said. "I've already thanked Nabu for the mounts we received," I continued. "But I feel a thousand 'thank you's would not be enough to express our gratitude! We are forever in your House's debt, Lady Sarpanit!"

"They are *wonderful*!" Savannah gushed.

Sarpanit smiled. "I knew you'd be both surprised and delighted. I recommended the pony for you, dear!"

"I cannot thank you enough! He's precious!" Savannah told our hostess, as she grasped Sarpanit's hand and gave it a squeeze. "I've named him 'Baron!'"

Sarpanit looked delighted. "How appropriate! He certainly looks and acts the part of a nobleman!"

Savannah beamed.

A long conch shell tone rang out in the night sky above us.

"Hold on!" Sarpanit cautioned us. We did so, while she explained, "This heavy thing can lurch about somewhat violently as it gets underway. "

Nabu gave three more, shorter conch blasts above us. Hoots and cheers rang out along the column behind us.

Just as Sarpanit said, the entire coach swayed to the right, then recovered a bit by lurching to the left. Then it seemed to leap forward. And suddenly, all was right again.

There were huge bay windows to our left – two of them, with divans built into them to allow passengers to lounge there and see the sights as the coach made its way along. The full moon had not risen yet, so we were left with a starlit landscape, with an impossibly vast number of stars above, and the Milky Way aglow in the northern sky.

Savannah was enchanted again and rose to her feet. Since I was still seated, I could not detect the coach's motion, but Savannah clearly had to steady herself as she crossed the deep-pile carpet and flung herself onto the nearest divan.

"My Lord!" she held out a hand to me, "Come sit with me!"

As I took to my feet, all of a sudden the coach seemed to be rocking and swaying to an incredible extent. I suppose this is what it feels like to find one's "sea legs" on a wooden sailing ship of old.

Savannah scooted up a bit so I could sit behind her, then kicked off her boots, so she could swing her feet up along the divan's length. I did likewise and sat with one leg tucked behind her, as she lay back and grabbed my arms to wrap around her waist.

"This is just too freakin' romantic!" she half-whispered. "I feel like I'm dreaming!" she said aloud.

"Ha!" Sarpanit laughed. "Now you know how the rest of us feel when we first lay our eyes upon *you*!"

Nabu laughed aloud as he descended from the roof. "Exactly the way I feel when I see her! She's bewitching!"

Savannah blushed.

The cabin's main door sprang open again, and Marduk heaved his massive self up and in. He steadied himself inside the doorway for a bit before he proceeded to flop down on his throne. The cabin floor shook with his weight. Once settled in, he gave the nearby black cord a tug and shouted "Cognac!"

A sleepy-headed servant entered, with a tray full of tumblers, a bucket of ice, and a bottle of Cognac. She poured the tumblers half-way.

The servant girl was only wearing a kimono. A very tiny kimono. When she stood before Savannah, it fell open as she handed Savannah her drink. Savannah gave her a quick once-over. She liked what she saw, and gave the servant a coy smile. The servant girl blushed. Savannah gave her a wink.

As she turned to leave and pulled her kimono together, she set the bottle down, within reach of everyone present, on a little serving table.

Sarpanit asked of her, before she could get away, "And dear, please bring us some snacks to get us by until we turn in tonight."

"Yes, My Lady," she drowsily replied, and disappeared behind the door to the servants' quarters. This wagon has servant's quarters, a pantry, as well as a Master Bedroom Suite, and guest quarters. On wheels.

"Poor dear," Sarpanit empathized, "I'm afraid we worked her half to death today." She took a contemplative sip of the Cognac, and continued, "I've come to depend on her too heavily – she's likely the liveliest, most capable servant I've ever had!"

Said servant returned, towing a serving table behind herself. The table was piled deeply with nuts, sliced fresh fruits, various breads, and several pastes – hummus, baba ghanoush, etc. – and dates, raisins, and other dried fruits. It was a sight to make me drool.

Figs! There was an entire plateful of figs – ripe, juicy figs. And dried figs of many sizes and colors. I was in fig heaven.

As the servant began to back her way out of the room, Sarpanit called over to her, “Nanshe, dear, I’m sure we’ll be fine for the rest of the evening. It’s been a long day, and I doubt we’ll be up for much longer.”

Savannah quickly leaned over and whispered something in my ear.

“Lady Sarpanit!” I sighed. “Lady Savannah has asked that Nanshe be allowed to stay in our quarters tonight, in case Savannah needs anything overnight?”

“Nanshe!” Marduk called aloud.

She obediently trotted over to kneel before his throne, and sat back on her heels, face to the floor, arms extended. “My Lord!” she said when she settled in.

“Our guests feel like they need someone to help them along this journey,” he exclaimed. “Would you enjoy being that person?”

“If it pleases my Lord, I would be honored to do as he wills!” she responded.

“Very well,” he stipulated, “you shall remain with Gaian and his household for the duration of their visit with us.”

“Yes, my lord!” Nanshe said, as she began to take to her feet. Savannah squealed with delight, jumped up, grabbed Nanshe’s wrist and hauled her into our quarters. Our quarters turned out to be a series of stalls, only separated from one another by thick, hanging curtains.

One stall was much larger than the others. It held a nice-sized bed. The other stalls held smaller beds, and there was a central room that had a table and some chairs, with duvets set into each wall, inside smaller bay windows than the ones in the coach’s main room.

A few seconds after they disappeared into our quarters, Nanshe reemerged to gather up a couple of plates of food, along with a couple of tumblers. She reached underneath the rolling table’s linen covering and grabbed an unopened bottle of brandy. “With your leave, my Lords! M’Lady!” she briefly curtsied, then returned to the darkness beyond the doorway. The door promptly slammed shut.

“I’m certain we all have questions we want answered,” I began to say. There was a loud “thop!” from the guest quarters, and the girls giggled a little.

“My head could burst from the number of questions I have for you, Gaian!” Nabu informed me.

“Oh, that feels good!” Savannah cooed.

We looked around at one another.

“OH! That ice is so COLD!” she continued. And further added, “Oh, my…OH! MY! OOOOOH-AAAHHH!”

“I don’t think we’ll get much serious discussion in tonight,” Marduk evaluated our situation.

Nanshe proclaimed, “You taste like honey and ripe nuts!”

Nabu opened the trap door in the ceiling again, pulled down the steps and began to ascend. “I think I’ll watch the stars for a little while, then retire to my own carriage.”

“If my Lord and Lady will excuse me, I believe I shall join your son.” I rose to follow him upwards.

“Enjoy yourselves!” Sarpanit called up to us. I could see Marduk lift his wife and begin to carry her off to their rooms. She reached behind him and grabbed the open bottle of Cognac, before they entered their suite, and the door slammed behind them.

Nabu, the Astrologer

Nabu and I settled into the couch recessed into the top of the coach, just behind the driver’s compartment. We set our feet upon the space between the two compartments and laid back to watch the stars. I could not believe the difference in what I saw then and what I was used to seeing, back in my mortal life on Earth. I’d rarely seen the Milky Way, for instance. Yet here, it shone magnificently, high in the sky. And so many stars. It was almost impossible to differentiate them from one another, there were so many, crowded together, everywhere.

“Excuse me if my mind drifts,” I said, after we’d become comfortable. “But, I’ve never seen so many stars before – in my former realm, the night sky was partially obscured by light pollution from cities and the various industries that made them possible.”

“The night sky *is* enthralling,” Nabu informed me. “I’ve seen people so awestricken by what they beheld, they’d break down in tears. I’ve seen people so perplexed, they’d make a habit of not being outdoors at night. I’ve seen people shocked into numbness when I’ve pointed out ‘the wanderers.’”

The ‘wanderers’ were the other planets in the solar system. Their movements would change, at times, depending on where they were on their orbital paths, and in relation to the Earth. If one were observant enough, one could watch as they’d seemingly reverse direction.

Before an awkward silence could develop, Nabu reached into a compartment beneath the couch and pulled out a bottle of rum. A most excellent rum, as it turned out. Old, smooth, and well-spiced. I like rum. Nabu opened it and took a swallow before he handed it to me.

“Oh, this is fine rum!” I praised it, after I sampled it. “I had a favorite rum, back in my mortal life. I’ve had so many fine liquors since my arrival, I have to wonder how it would compare to the ones here.” I passed the bottle back to him.

“I’m sure you can find out, with the help of your clouds,” he suggested.

“**My** clouds?” I asked.

“They only exist in Ninkasi’s Halls!” he said. “My aunt is quite the catch, and you are one, very lucky wizard.” He toasted me with the bottle and passed it back to me after he took a swig.

“She’s a living doll!” I seconded him, then added, “And so talented. Her brewing skills are beyond wizard-class. She stands apart, heads and shoulders above what any other brewer could ever possibly hope to achieve. She amazes me every day with something totally unexpected.” I took another swig from the bottle and gave it back to the Prince.

“It’s good to know you appreciate her,” he replied. “We tend to want to look after her, these days. She’s the ‘baby’ of my father’s generation – the last-born child of Daminka and Enki.”

“It kinda shows,” I contemplated aloud. “She doesn’t hesitate to follow her bliss, and expects things to work out just fine!”

Nabu was taking a huge draw from the rum while I appraised his aunt. He handed me the bottle. “Are you implying that she’s spoiled?”

“Not so much *implying*,” I replied, “as I am *observing*.” Nabu had to laugh at that. I took a drink from the bottle and handed it back to him.

“How about we take that late-night ride we were planning on earlier,” he inquired. “It’s been a long day for me, and laying under the stars is lulling me to sleep.”

He put the rum back where he found it.

“An excellent idea!” I agreed. There was a fairly good chance we’d get into a shouting match soon, as I’d taken offense to some of what he’d said, but wanted to keep the peace, since everyone else had retired for the evening.

Nabu instructed me on how to untie the horses, then lead them around the wheels and to the side of the coach. With a quick step down, one could readily swing one’s leg over the saddle and plop down on it, without having to jump into the saddle from above.

We rode along in silence for a little while. Between the amazing amount of starlight, and the rising, waxing, gibbous moon, there was plenty of light to help us find our way. I was astounded.

The night air was beginning to grow a little chilly. I shivered and cursed at myself for not thinking ahead to bring along a cloak or jacket.

“I should have thought ahead, and brought along some Brandy,” I muttered aloud.

Nabu put his hand to his heart. “Gaian, you wound me!” he professed. “There’s a compartment below your saddle’s horn. Search there.”

It took a second to discern the way the compartment's lid worked, but I soon opened it, and - up! - popped a bottle. Of Brandy.

"Father says you are rather fond of Brandy, so we decided to put a bottle there until it was needed." He laughed at himself. "Who knew it would be needed so soon?"

I eagerly popped the cork-stopper out of the bottle's neck and took a decent draw. It was – as expected – smooth, sweet, and delicious. As soon as I swallowed, I began to feel goodness and warmth flow all over my body. Brandy's awesome.

I handed the bottle to Nabu. He took a nice-sized draw, too, then handed it back to me. "Just enough to take the chill out of the air!" he evaluated his drink. "If I drink anymore, I might fall asleep in the saddle." We rode in silence again, for only a few seconds, before he added, "That's sooo embarrassing!"

I had to laugh as he passed the bottle back to me. I like Nabu, I let myself know, and hoped we would become friends.

"Let's run up to the top of this ridge we're climbing!" he challenged me. It wasn't so terribly far away, and I was certain Mysti would be able to keep up with the Arabian Nabu rode.

"Sounds good to me," I replied, then called to Mysti, "Let's go, girl!" while I nudged her with my heels.

We both took off like rockets, and Mysti steadily began to leave them behind. The distance was a bit longer than I'd realized, and the Arabian was just pulling up alongside of us when we crested the ridge.

"She's so fast!" Nabu praised her, "But not a lot of endurance."

"It's her breed – they are all but uncatchable at distances up to two furlongs," I lectured my friend. "They are one of the favorites for ranchers, for their ability to stop and go, and to beat any animal that needs to be sorted from the herd to anyplace it wants to go." We had slowed our mounts to a walk. The ridge ran flat before us for a furlong or so – the nighttime light made it difficult to judge distances – before it began to descend into the plain which held the Euphrates river. The descent was slight enough that the road merely took a slight turn, then descended the rest of the way in a straight line. The starlight may have made it difficult to judge distances, but the view of the plain and river that night was mesmerizing. It took my breath away, so much so I had to take another nip of the Brandy.

'Why?" I asked Nabu, "Why is everything here conspiring to dazzle my senses and leave me breathless?"

He chuckled and dipped his head to give the slightest of shakes. "He likes me," I decided, "but he isn't in a hurry to become attached. Must be some sort of immortality thing."

"I know we both have a zillion questions we'd like to ask one another," I proposed, "So how about we take turns – first one of us asks a question, and when satisfied with the answer, the other asks?"

"That sounds agreeable to me," he consented, "So tell me – how much is a zillion?"

“I don’t know,” I conceded, “but it sure does *sound* like a lot!”

Again, he had to laugh. I offered him the brandy again. He shrugged his shoulders and accepted the bottle. After a nice sip, he handed it back.

“What do you think of Savannah – and I mean, as someone who’s been resurrected?” I would value his appraisal. I’ve only known her for a few weeks, so how would I know either what she’s actually like as a person, or how she seems to be, in other people’s eyes.

“Honestly, I only met her for the first time tonight,” he precluded his evaluation. “But I see no signs that she’s ever experienced any harm. I mean, she was dead just yesterday, and grievously damaged. There’s absolutely no indication – either in her form, or her countenance – that she’s suffered any sort of injury or trauma whatsoever.” He turned in his saddle to make sure we made eye contact. “That’s remarkable at a miraculous level. People are already beginning to revere you as a ‘God.’

“‘Gaian the Resurrector,’ they call you. Justifiably so – you’ve done something none of us have ever been able to achieve.”

I let his praise wash over me. “I’m no sort of ‘God,’” I notified him. We rode along in silence for a second. Satisfied that I was content with his response, he took a turn as scrutinizer.

“Have you even noticed how much lovelier my aunt has become since your death?” He again turned to face me. “And she was quite the looker before then!”

“Well…” I admitted, “we were in the midst of a very romantic tryst around that time. I thought I was mostly just more in love. And new to this whole being dead, Hereafter thing.”

“Good answer!” he judged.

“So, tell me,” I grinned, “would you have a go with your aunt?”

“Asked the man with two daughters as his concubines!” He laughed at me. We’re quite alike, in some ways. It seems like he’s a jolly drunk, too! The thought made me happy.

He suddenly became serious, though. “Do you have any idea of who you are?” he demanded.

“You mean, who I *was*,” I shot back at him. “People have accused me of being an aspect of your former uncle Dummuzi. I feel like I’d know if I were. I seem to be able to aspect sacred spirits – nature spirits, and Human legends – at will. I’ve come to think I am a reiteration of one of Dummuzi’s scribes.”

“So unsure of yourself, and so brazenly cocky at the same time,” Nabu appraised me. “You’re a walking bundle of contradictions. You are so much like…!” He paused.

“Who?” I implored.

“It’s clearly obvious you haven’t realized yet,” he looked my way again. “Don’t let it come as a shock when it hits you, my friend,” he cautioned me. “There’s a reason…sorry, I’ll have to let you sort it out for yourself.”

I'd lost track of who's turn it was to ask a question. Since Nabu didn't immediately ask another one, I jumped in. "I can sense when someone I'm close to is present. I did with my daughter Autonomia, yesterday…" I began to overexplain...

"I sense him as well…" he confessed. I didn't respond. Before the silence between us grew awkward, he continued: "My uncle, Prince Dummuzi."

"His corpse was found, something like 20 Earth years ago." I informed him. "I think he's been cloned, and he walks the Earth again, separated from his soul."

"And what are you planning to do about that?" Rather than waste our time asking him why he thinks I'd do anything about the situation I described, I flat-out told him.

"I'm going to liberate his body from those who are attempting to use him for their own foul machinations," I said matter-of-factly, "and reunite him with his soul."

Nabu reined his horse to a halt. "You realize that many would consider your words as blasphemous, and possibly even treasonous?" he spat at me.

"You realize that my only real loyalty is to my wives, my family, and my Lord Dummuzi? I have no clue as to my relationship to him, but I know I admire and respect him above all the males of your Race."

Nabu whipped some sort of device out from a saddlebag behind his horse's saddle. "Give me the exact time of your birth!" He demanded.

"In Earth terms of my time, I was born…" I gave him the time, date, month, and calendar year of my birth. He input the data into the device, after making some mental calculations. He pressed a button on the device. A slowly rotating, green globe appeared before us. The green light formed itself into a grid, while beneath, a facsimile of planet Earth appeared.

"Now show me the place of your birth!" he further demanded.

"You're not going to like this!" I told him.

"Indulge me!" he bellowed.

"Let's go," I asked of Mysti. She hesitated and pranced around a bit. "It's alright, girl. It's just light! It's harmless.

Trust me!" I patted her neck and gave it a few strokes. She trotted over to the globe, and I reined her around, so we approached Nabu a few paces. I would have patiently awaited the land of my birth to rotate into place before us, but the globe was moving too slowly.

"Could you speed up the rotation somewhat?" I asked. He did as I requested, and the place came whizzing over towards us. "Whoop!" I called, "Stop, if you don't mind."

I had a good look over North America. When satisfied, I once again cautioned Nabu, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Just do it!" he exhaled.

I leaned over to the appropriate place. “Right about there!” I stabbed a finger into the display, then wheeled Mysti away from it and walked her over to stand beside the Prince, facing the glowing globe representing the Earth.

Nabu punched a few buttons and turned a dial or two on his device. The globe shrank a bit, and the place my finger pointed out glowed red. All at once, a display of the heavens appeared around and above us. Nabu pressed a button on his device. He took a look around. He pressed another one and had another peek at the projection. He pressed a lot of buttons and had yet another look.

“This isn’t possible!” he cried aloud.

“It’s not like I didn’t warn you!” I teased him.

“Things like this don’t happen!” he shouted at me, totally unnecessarily. I mean, I was sitting seven feet from him.

He tossed his device down in disgust, turned his night-colored Arabian around, and they ran off, across the ridge, and back toward the caravan.

I had Mysti walk over to the place I thought I’d seen Nabu’s device land. After dismounting and a short search, I found it. It wasn’t lit up anymore, and I hoped it wasn’t broken. I strapped it to Mysti’s saddle, pulled myself onto her saddle, and we walked back to join the approaching caravan.

Marduk the Magician

I dismounted from Mysti by standing on her saddle and jumping over to the moving coach, which still swayed

and rocked noticeably. I took her reins and tied them next to Baron’s.

“I feel like we’re neglecting you!” I told her, as I pet her nose. “Leaving you saddled, and making you walk behind us all night. I promise to take much better care of you both, once we reach the Euphrates.”

“It’s nothing! We’re strong!” A female voice spoke to me, in my head. Baron gave a snort and bobbed his head.

I looked at Mysti. “Was that…?”

“Who else?” she stated.

“I have a clairvoyant horse, and I’m headed to Babylon, in the company of Gods and Goddesses. I suppose I’m going to have to get used to stuff like this,” I thought.

“You are nothing short of a miracle, darlin’,” I proclaimed.

“Well, then - you are in for a treat tonight,” she informed me. “Behold Marduk the Magician! He sits behind you! Watch as he performs a miracle right before your eyes!”

“Thank you for the information! I would have turned in for the night if I didn’t know!” I patted her nose again.

I turned and made my way to the compartment behind the driver’s seat, again. Just as Mysti said, Marduk sat up front, beside the driver. He stretched his arms high above his head, then took a deep breath as he brought his arms down to his sides. He rolled his shoulders, placed his hands on his waist and turned as far to each side as he could. All the while, he kept his eyes focused on some point directly in the path of the coach.

He allowed himself to take a break for a few minutes before he began to stretch his arms out again. His arms made some wild gesticulations, and I failed to understand what he was doing. At some point, his arm motions began to look more coordinated, until they began to move together, and he clasped his hands. At that point, he slowly rose to his feet. It was as if he lifted a heavy, heavy something unseen. He raised his hands high above his head when he stood fully upright.

A streak of light appeared in the air in front of and above the coach. It followed the course of the road, which was fairly straight at this point. We’d just crested the ridge and were making the descent downward, into the plain of the Euphrates.

Marduk turned his hands outward – his palms faced opposite directions. He began to push downward, against some unseen force which offered a lot of resistance. His muscles bulged with the effort. His entire body shook as he forced his arms lower. And a little lower. It was slow going, but he continued to make progress, until his hands were down around hip level.

As he pushed downward, the beam of light above grew wider, and brighter. So many colors flashed throughout its length, swirling about one another in hectic, chaotic flashes!

As the light expanded, it began a downward arc, so that it would eventually form a circle, and describe a tunnel through which the road in front of us would pass. The Oxen team pulling the coach along must be used to such things, because they never startled and made no sounds of alarm, fear, or protest as they continued along their path.

Finally, Marduk pushed downward with a mighty heave and his hands clapped together. The tunnel was

completed, and one could make out the light shining beneath the ground. As the coach made its way into the tunnel, the light blocked out any view of the outside world. Neither stars, moon, nor Milky Way was visible. Somewhere, far ahead, was a point of darkness which demarked the tunnel’s end. I’d never seen any such magic before, but I know a feat of High Magic when I see one.

I leaned forward and whispered, “I need the clouds! I need a flagon of the Revitalizing Brew!”

The Gizmo spouted some steam until enough was present to form a little cloud. A little, blue hand and arm reached out from within the cloud with a flagon of beer for me. As I reached over to take possession of the flagon, another blue hand shot out of the cloud, reached behind my head and pulled it forward. Chloe planted a passionate, juicy kiss on my lips and into my mouth. She's a very talented kisser. Quite a nimble tongue.

"I love you, Gaian!" she whispered as she let go of the flagon and my head.

Before she completely disappeared, I let her know "You're a living doll, Chloe!"

It took a second to regain my composure, then I made my way to Marduk's side. His chest heaved with the effort of breathing. He was completely exhausted, on the brink of total collapse. I removed the lid to the flagon by snapping it off and then tossed it aside, into the desert around us. It passed through the wall of the tunnel of light and made a snapping, popping sound as it did. The colors swirled around the place where it disappeared, like a whirlpool at the site of a drain.

Marduk glanced my way and his eyes expressed surprise at my presence. "Here," I offered. And held the flagon out to him. He was actually too weak to take it from me. I was nonplused.

I moved closer to him and lifted his head up, then propped him somewhat upright with a leg. I held the flagon up to his mouth and tipped it slightly. The coach picked that moment to lurch a bit, and swayed quickly a few times to the left and right. I spilt brew all over the mighty King of Babylon.

"Sorry about that!" I said. Marduk grabbed at the flagon to keep it where it was. He was guzzling the brew down with tremendous gulps. Some suds shot from his nostrils, and I pulled the flagon out of his hands and held it away from him, as he coughed.

"Breath!" I commanded. I would have added "Stupid!" if it were anyone but him. And maybe Nabu. I really like Nabu.

"Your talent for showing up with the Revitalizing Brew when needed is uncanny," he appraised.

"I was watching your performance," I responded. "**That** was uncanny!"

"It usually takes an entire field of sorcerers to perform this particular feat," he boasted. "I created a tunnel through time and space, to enable us to visit Babylon at the height of its glory."

"Autonomia and Savannah can move through time and space like fish swim through water," I jealously remarked. "I haven't developed the knack for it. I'm dependent on the clouds, for now. But, there's no way I could take along such a large caravan with me. I'd be bouncing back and forth all night!

"You continue to honor me, and I find it baffling," I divulged.

Marduk shook his head a little. He was obviously still suffering from the lingering effects of expending so much

energy with his Great Work. I gave the flagon back to him, then fished around beneath the seat where I sat. Before long, I had the bottle of rum from earlier in my grasp, uncorked, and upended. I took a huge quaff.

The rest of the caravan was entering the tunnel. Every color churned around us in a turbulent, random, ever-changing swirl of splendid beauty. It would be easy to lay back and allow the colors to hypnotize me. Marduk saw me staring and warned me, “Don’t focus your gaze on any one spot for too long. There are…things…which dwell in this realm of the in-between that were once living creatures, maybe even similar to us. Many of them yearn to return to our realm, and will take possession of a Being mesmerized by the swirling colors. Others are jealous of us, and can cause significant damage to one’s psyche and spirit.”

I shook my head and looked towards him as he rose from the driver’s compartment to step over and join me. I noticed then that the driver was blind. I guess for his protection. The oxen just do as they are instructed. When told to stop, they stop. When told to walk, they walk along the road before them. I was impressed. Again. Marduk is quite an impressive Being.

“You’ve put my son into a bit of a quandary,” he told me. “He’s not certain we can trust you, but he enjoys your company.”

“I get that everywhere I go!” I complained.

“I can well imagine,” Marduk replied. “You’re not the type to follow along with the crowd. And you are close to being the embodiment of anarchy.” I puffed out my chest with pride at that remark.

He took a break to drink some more of the beer.

“I suppose I’m too accepting of things I feel I cannot do anything about,” I pondered aloud.

“But, you poke and jab at such things every chance you get,” he said.

“Nabu got all of that from a brief glance at my birth chart?” I asked, somewhat perplexed.

“He says you were born to overthrow the existing order and replace it with one that is something more to your liking - much more flexible, something nurturing and fulfilling.” Marduk finished his beer.

“Has it occurred to you that ***I*** am the ‘Old Order’ you were born to overthrow?” he accused.

“Hardly,” I told him. “Every promise made to you has been broken. Every domain granted to you was usurped by Enlil and his House.

“And **why**,” I demanded of him, “is Sin still alive? He should be executed for all the taboos he’s broken!”

“Calm down!” the God/Emperor cautioned me. He looked as if he were ready to burst out laughing, though.

“The things Humans do…” he shook his head as he stood to descend into the coach. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve had a particularly demanding day and night, and I need to lay down before I fall down,” he told me.

"*Dulces sueños*!" I called to him as he disappeared down the stairs.

On the Road to Babylon

I didn't want to take a chance on waking the girls. I needed a good night's sleep – for at least as long as this night had left.

I was out the second I settled onto the couch.

I dreamt childhood memories of Christmas feasts at *mi abuelita's* house – one of three my grandfather built on two acres he owned on the wrong side of the tracks in my hometown. He died a few years before my birth, and I sometimes wonder how much different my life would have been if he had lived.

The dream was so vivid, I swear I was able to actually interact with my aunts and mother as the person I am now, not the teenager I was when I truly began to love and appreciate *mi familia*.

On most Sunday afternoons, my aunts would all gather in their mother's kitchen, and I often sat at the dining table, out of their way, to eavesdrop on their conversations and just wallow in their constant laughter.

The afternoon of Christmas Eve, they'd all come together to make a huge batch of tamales. We'd have some for dinner that evening, but most were destined for their freezers.

On Christmas Day, we'd all return in the afternoon for a feast. As my very vivid dream continued, the aroma from everything cooking – chicken in molé sauce, Spanish rice, enchiladas in molé sauce, refried beans, freshly grilled tortillas – filled my mind with longing, until the fragrance was so overwhelming it woke me up. And I could still smell it, only more so.

I opened my eyes and rubbed the sleep out of them, then shook my head to clear out the fuzzy remnant vision of a table laid out with the feast. Only, the vision didn't fade. I blinked my eyes a few times, but the sight remained unchanged. I could see steam rising from the covered serving plates and casserole pans. I held out a hand and felt the heat. I jumped to my feet and ran to where I hoped to find a place to urinate, found it, and took care of business.

As I finished zipping up and cleaning my hands, I eagerly rushed back to the table, helped myself to a plate, plopped a fresh, hot tortilla on it and ladled some rice and beans on it, accompanied by some pico-de-gallo and hot, dark brown salsa. Then I added a ladlesful from the pot of chicken soaking in molé sauce. And made sure to drip some of the sauce onto the rice and beans. Not content with that, I lifted the lid on a casserole plate and dished out a few cheese enchiladas onto my plate, again making sure to drip much sauce on top of them.

I was in tears as I greedily rolled up the tortilla and shoved as much of it into my mouth as possible. And – unlike at our family gatherings, which were alcohol-free – reached across the table to help myself to a Modela Negra. Everything turned out to be spicily delicious, just like I

remembered. But, it was steamy hot, so I had to follow each bite with a swig of beer to prevent my mouth from being scorched.

After downing my first chomp from the tortilla and washing it down with a generous quaff of beer, I said aloud, “I don’t know how this is possible, nor who is responsible, but I thank you - *muchos gracias! Gracias! Gracias!*” I actually had to take a break from eating for a second and dry my tears.

Nanshe came stumbling through the door to our quarters. (*I had not yet seen our guest suite by this point, BTW.*) She was wearing one of **my** shirts. Like, how and why…? She looked way hot in it, even with her hair all a mess. And she wore a genuinely happy expression on her face.

“My Lord!” she observed, disconcertedly. “What is all this? It smells so delicious and spicy.” She picked a napkin up from the table and dabbed at her eyes. “The steam makes my eyes water. And my nose is tingling!”

“Don’t worry about it, just taste something,” I demanded. “It’s spicy, but not hot. The little pots have sauces for that. There should be a light green one, and a dark green one, then three reddish ones. The darker the tint, the hotter the peppers!”

Nanshe popped some of the Spanish rice into the center of a plate, then dripped some shredded chicken-in-molé-sauce on top of it.

She tasted the rice first. Her curiosity as a cook was slowing her down, but she was clearly interested in discovering the food’s delectable secrets. She looked very surprised, then took a little bite of the chicken, followed quickly by a forkful of everything left on her plate, which was no meager feat for an average-sized table fork.

She immediately dipped the fork into the pot of refried beans for a quick sample. She loved it!

“Allow me,” I said as she nearly swooned from the beans. She pulled a pitcher of water from below the serving table’s top, while I took her plate and slapped a tortilla on it, then spooned some beans and rice into the center. I dipped out a few spoonfuls of molé sauce on top of them, then a few spoonfuls of sauce with chicken. And another spoonful from the light green salsa. Then, I rolled it up and handed her the plate. She curtsied ever-so-slightly, hefted the burrito up, and took a hungry bite out of it. She stomped her foot and rolled her eyes. After she swallowed a bit of her bite she said, “Thith ith tho good!”

I fished a bottle of wine – a Rosea – and a couple of wine flutes out from under the table and hurriedly opened the bottle, so we could properly wash our food down.

After downing the last of her first bite, she was glad to have the wine. It helps to dissolve oils, like the ones that give peppers their hot flavor.

“What is this sauce? I’ve never encountered anything like it!” She was actually amazed, and looked to be anticipating a life-changing revelation.

“This is a sort of Mexican bar-b-que sauce, made with unsweetened cocao,” I lectured. “The tomatillo sauce I put in your tortilla is tart, and it helps bring out the chocolate’s bitterness.”

She took another bite, nowhere nearly as large as the first one. And made a few analytical chews before she swallowed. “That’s amazing! So rich, so much depth of flavor. This is inspired! What genius!”

“Your appreciation is much appreciated, Nanshe,” I awkwardly appraised her. She took another bite of the burrito I’d presented her, then began to heap food on her plate for real.

Savannah came out of the guest quarters to join us. She was wearing Nanshe’s tiny Kimono. Untied. Sarpanit emerged from the Royal Chambers in a fine dressing robe. Quilted silk.

“This smells wonderous, Nanshe!” the Queen evaluated the tableful of food.

Nanshe bowed to her Queen. “Thank you, m’lady – but Gaian is responsible for this exotic feast,” she briefed her Ladyship.

Before she could react, I declared, “Don’t look at me! All I know is I had been dreaming about the feasts we had at my Grandmother’s house when I was a child, and I woke up to one similar.” I pointed out, “There was no beer, for one thing – no alcohol of any type. And there seem to be extra things I don’t…hold on!”

I took the lid off a cast iron skillet. Underneath, briefly obscured by a cloud of steam, lay a round, deep loaf of cornbread. I wanted to cry again. Instead, I lifted the lid of an identical skillet, and beheld a panful of blue cornbread.

“We didn’t have blue cornbread. We’re *Tejano*, and blue cornbread and tortillas are from *Nuevo Mexico*.” I lifted the lid from a clay pot. “Red tortillas are New Mexican, too.” I pointed out, while revealing the contents to one, last clay pot. Combo wheat/corn tortillas! I greedily snatched one up and plopped it down on my plate. “These are a treat not to be missed,” I explained to the Others, who now included Marduk.

With everyone busy piling food from the nearest source onto the plates Nanshe handed around, I forked off a bit from the cheese enchiladas and offered it to Nanshe. “You haven’t even touched the main course of the table – the enchiladas!”

Nanshe tentatively took the bite, and I removed the fork from between her lovely, round lips. She began to chew. Each chew was somewhat slower in coming than its predecessor. She looked like she was about to flop over, then she shook herself out of her stupor, finished chewing, and guzzled down her food with some of the wine.

Nanshe suddenly had a look around the room. She’d been so busy in her exploration of the mysterious meal, she’d neglected her duties as a servant. No worries, though – she saw Savannah chatting with the Royals as she filled a wine glass and handed it to Marduk. Sarpanit already had one, and Savannah poured one for herself.

Once we had all heaped our plates full of food, we sat down and kept our mouths too full of delicious spiciness to enable us to speak. Savannah looked the most pleased of all of us. She sat with her back straight, her shoulders thrown back, and a huge grin on her face. She was so, so happy – all was well in her world.

Nanshe had dished all five salsas onto her plate. As she sat beside Savannah, on the ground at her feet, she tried a little bit of each sauce. When she tried the second-hottest red one, her eyes teared up and she fanned the air in front of her lips while she inhaled.

“A sip of the wine would do you better, but don’t…” I was too late. She’d already swallowed.

“Ahhhrrrrgh!” she cried. “It scorched my throat.”

“You should have just spit it out, after swishing it around in your mouth,” I cautioned her. Then added, to the Others, “Ya’ll might want to just skip the darkest red sauce and the dark green one. They are hot on a completely different level than the rest.”

Of course, everyone ceremoniously defied me, and dolloped up heaping spoonfuls of the darkest green salsa onto their food. I did likewise. Habanero sauce. They were about to discover Habanero peppers. My eyes watered from the steam as I slowly raised a bite of the enchiladas to my face. I took a sniff, and my sinuses cleared. I had to wipe my nose. Then I took the bite into my mouth and chewed it – slowly.

It burned. Oh! How it burned. Spiciness shot up through my sinus cavities and into my brain. My tongue stung

and vowed vengeance. The food burned all the way down, and churned my guts with violent spicy pepperwrath. I was truly in heaven.

I couldn’t help it – I just laughed and laughed at the Others who had defied me. Only Savannah heeded my advice. She winked at me and kept munching on her food, beaming a sweet, sweet smile the whole time.

Nanshe was on her feet, trying to administer remedies to the Royal Couple, who had tried to pretend they could handle the heat, at first.

“Don’t swallow!” she warned, but it was too late.

“Oh, you’ll regret that later!” I laughed. “Ever hear the expression ‘shitfire?’” I couldn’t help myself.

“If you haven’t, you’ll bring it to mind, later. Those peppers will burn all the way through your system. All. The. Way.” I shook my head and wiped away my tears. I love Habaneros. Not only are they hotter than just about anything on Earth, they have such a full, deep flavor. They go really well with chocolate, sweetened or not.

Nabu suddenly popped the outside door open and entered. He had no idea about what was going on, but saw that Savannah and I were viewing the situation with broad smiles, while everyone else seemed to be suffering terribly. He began to draw his sword, but his father shook his hand at him. He still couldn’t speak, though. He pointed to the little pots of salsa with his fork and waved it over them to caution his son not to have anything to do with them.

“What, are they poisoned?” he asked.

“My Lord!” Nanshe cried. “We have been sampling some exotic food that Gaian somehow summoned here.” I gave Nabu a welcoming salute with my fork.

“It’s mostly harmless,” I reported. To demonstrate, I forked off a piece of enchilada and dipped it into the Habanero sauce, lifted it to my mouth and ate it. “See?” I remarked.

He cautiously approached the tableful of food. His eyes immediately began to water. Undaunted, he also forked up a bite of enchilada and dipped it into the dark green sauce. I gave him one of those “Really?” looks, and tilted my head slightly to further illustrate my disappointment in his desire to follow the crowd.

He almost spit it out. Nanshe handed him a tumbler with rum in it. “Rinse and spit!” she urged him. Being the level-headed Being his is, he refused to take a helpful suggestion from the servant, and swallowed the rum, laced with Habanero sauce.

Nabu grabbed the bottle from Nanshe’s hand and uprighted it. He made a valiant effort to drain it, but the realization that it was not yet mid-day made him give it a stop around midway. He gasped. “What is this, some horror food for masochists?” he demanded to know.

“It’s fine!” I spoke up. “It’s an acquired taste.”

I took another bite, as did my concubine. She waved her fork in the air, as if to illustrate, “See – harmless!” She continued to beam her brightest smile. Tears were leaking down her cheeks at that point, however. She took a second to wipe her face and sniffle.

“Gaian – this is beyond pleasurable, and I mean that in a negative sense,”

Marduk cast aspersions on my family’s cuisine.

Sarpanit threw in, “Well…my People enjoy spicy foods as well. It’s just been a while since I’ve had any.” She circled her fork around, above the sauces. “Gaian, which ones would you say are safely spicy, but not without some bite?”

“The red one, in the middle,” I recommended. She dipped her fork into the one I endorsed and had a careful taste of it. Satisfied that it was not going to cause further damage, she set her fork down and began to spoon some onto a heap of rice and beans on her plate, then added some of the chicken-in-molé. She let out a deep sigh and settled onto her throne as she chewed. “This is just amazing!” she commended her sample after she’d swallowed. She took a larger forkful.

Nabu began to load up a plate with what he saw, a little sampling of everything on offer. He followed his mother’s example and gave the medium-hot salsa a try. He put a little of it onto an enchilada and slowly inserted it into his mouth and began to chew. Satisfied it would not cause him any harm, he swallowed, but still reached for a bottle of beer Nanshe set before him to help get the burning sensation off of his tongue. He let out a relieved sigh and walked around the table to have a seat between Savannah and me.

“Have you heard about the latest commemorative stela to be erected in my aunt’s Halls? This very morning, I believe.” Nabu took a bite as he awaited a reply. None was forthcoming, though. When he swallowed, he enlightened us: “It’s to commemorate what has come to be known as the DKG – the Divine, Killer Gangbang.”

Savannah looked heart-wrenched. “Seriously?” she asked. “They’re not going to let me forget about this, ever?” she looked as if she were about to break down in tears. Sarpanit was on her feet, then knelt on the floor in front of my daughter/concubine.

“Oh, dear one,” she cooed as she set a hand on one of Savannah’s knees to comfort her. “Always be proud of your accomplishments.”

“And your death is scarcely mentioned,” Nabu chimed in. “It’s mostly just an asterisk, in the columns which tally the final death toll. Six to their side, one on yours. With an asterisk, which leads one to the footnote ‘She got better!’”

The Royal Couple and I had a chuckle over that. Savannah still looked appalled.

Sarpanit goaded her, “Do you recall what Autonomia said, upon being awoken by her father?” she inquired. “No?”

Nabu uttered, “’You should see the other guys!’” before taking another bite from the food piled high on his plate.

“Darling – between Chloe, Zoe, Autonomia and yourself,” Sarpanit marveled, “two Titans, three demigods, and the Lord of Sheep, Ab-Bau met their ends that night.”

Savannah was taken aback. “We fucked them to ***death***?” she asked, alarm written upon her face.

“It was the second most deadly night of all Ninkasi’s Harvest Festivals,” Marduk told her.

“But…” Savannah stumbled for words. “Isn’t that illegal or something?”

Sarpanit guffawed at that. “Sweetie, they could have stopped at any time. It was *their* choice.” She gave

Savannah’s leg a pat, which caused her untied kimono to come open. Nanshe was on top of the situation immediately, and tied the kimono shut.

“Dress yourself properly before entering the presence of Royalty!” Nanshe admonished her. “What, were you raised by wolves?”

“So what if I was?” Savannah demanded to know. “Wolves are very gracious and affectionate towards their offspring!”

Conversation came to a brief halt. I suddenly understood Savannah so much better. She’s no one to be trifled with, if you ask me.

Sarpanit rose to her feet to return to her seat, after making a quick stop to reload on her favorites amongst the offerings from the feast before us.

“Just look at you,” the Queen sighed as she loaded her plate. “I’m afraid you are destined to outshine us all, lovely one!”

We all raised our glasses to toast Savannah. She was getting over her embarrassment over the commemorative stela, and the DKG.

“Well, be prepared for the end of the journey,” Marduk forewarned us after another pause in the conversation. “We should arrive near the Euphrates River sometime late this afternoon.

“We’ll pitch a camp there, for your House, Gaian.” He made sure we made eye contact. “I hope you don’t mind, but those who tend to the livestock will share your camp, though your tents will be set apart from theirs.

“Also, I will have a detachment of my Royal Guard camped with you.” He stretched and yawned. “All should be safe so near to Babylon, but one never knows,” he leveled with us.

“And I will be visiting every day, to make sure all is ready for your big day and grand entrance!” Nabu said. He gave us a wry smile. “You just have no idea the spectacle your arrival will make!”

Marduk snickered. “It will be like nothing you’ve ever experienced.,” he promised us.

We continued to make small talk and eat until we were well satiated, and the Royals had to leave to attend to their various duties.

A Week in Camp

We camped outside the city for a week.

The Royal Couple remained with us for the first night. When they departed the next morning, they rode horses at the front of the column they led away. Though a tall sand dune obscured Babylon from our sight at the camp, we heard the great cheer which greeted them when they entered the city. Savannah, Nanshe and I were already saddling our mounts, and ran them up to the summit of the dune to have a look. Babylon’s white walls glistened in the heat of the day, and we arrived in time to see the massive gates into the city swing shut. As we had a look around from atop the high dune, another cheer arose, accompanied by various blasts of trumpets, conch shells and ram’s horns.

“Damn!” I said. “I suppose that’s how things go, when one is a God/Emperor!”

Over the following days, the three of us got to know our mounts much better, and I taught Savannah how to care for and feed them. No nosebags for our friends! We had their food served up in wide, deep woven bowls. They were well impressed with that, and when first I filled their bowls with grains-on-the-stalk, nuts, sliced veggies, fresh fruit, as well as coconut meats, both of the ponies and my horse nudged my shoulder in thanks. I laughed and patted them on their necks.

After feeding them and currying their fur, we’d saddle up and go for a morning ride and find a place to picnic for breakfast. Or second breakfast. We often rode out just as the sun was beginning to crest the mountains to the east in order to return to camp just as the day was beginning to bring the heat.

Crowds were seen gathering and growing larger every day, along the walls of the city. The Babylonians were eager to catch sight of Savannah as we rode along the banks of the Euphrates. Eventually, most of them grew bold enough to camp on the opposite bank of the river. We rode along the top of a dune ridge, easily two furlongs from the river. No one tried to

come closer. I think the Royal Guards Nabu left in charge of our camp's security would not allow anyone within bow-shot of us. Which was fine with me.

Nanshe's sudden appearance alongside us on the second day of our morning rides caused some stirring in the camps across the river. Nanshe tans quickly, and her skin was a gorgeous shade of brown when we met her. She grew darker by the day, which only made her look sexier. Plus, since the days were warm, she scarcely wore any clothes. Just the briefest of halter tops and extraordinarily tiny shorts, with thigh-high riding boots.

It was noticeable from a distance, though: Nanshe was tied to Savannah – rarely left her side, deferred to her, and held her pony when she mounted or dismounted.

We'd used part of our first morning in camp to pick out a suitable pony for Nanshe. We settled on a young New Forest pony female, then left her to pick out her preferred tackle. Nanshe has excellent, yet simple tastes. She prefers durability over appearance, craftsmanship above decorative merit. She chose a sidesaddle much like Savannah's.

In the end, Nanshe and Savannah rode ponies that were all but negative mirror-images of one another; Savannah atop a Palomino New Forest Pony with gold-colored fur, blonde for its tail and mane – along with four white socks. Nanshe's New Forest Pony was buckskin-colored, with four black socks, and black hair for its tail and

mane.

Our musician friends just went ahead and moved into the camp on day three, so as to be able to help me learn some of their traditional songs, and get some instruction on their instruments. By night five, we were practically a Band, with a retinue of dance tunes of the day, and about four hours' worth of tunes I loved well enough to remember the words and music to, which I taught them to play. They were often disappointed with the brevity of the songs. I just recommended we improvise to our heart's content, so as to stretch a three-minute tune into a nine-minute jam session.

Not to brag or anything, but I was playing for around four hours every evening, with some practice in the afternoons. I was getting good, really quickly. Alain was well-impressed. I reminded him that I was out of practice when we first met – that long, long week ago (in his timeline). I also let him know I enjoyed life much more when I played music daily.

By morning four, people camped along the river began calling to us with their conch shells, or ram's horns. Since I carried a conch shell in my saddle, I would reply, while the girls waved. This never failed to elicit cries of praise from the far bank.

On morning five, I rode ahead in order to scout out some disturbances I'd caught in the underbrush near the spot where we took our morning picnic break, and had second breakfast. There's an Otter den nearby, and one entryway was being guarded by a snake, which the Otters were busy trying to drive away. No big deal, except that Euphrates river snakes are notably very venomous, and even little injections of venom are enough to kill most people. I stood Mysti near the bank and allowed her to drink a bit, while I kept an eye out for more river snakes.

When I looked back over my shoulder, I caught a glimpse of the reason why people were so fascinated with Savannah. The early morning sun could catch her hair – especially on a ridgetop – and illuminate it so that it looked as if her hair were either made of gold, or on fire. When we rode along the ridge, the sun's first light would often shine through her hair well before it

illuminated the rest of the world around us. Little wonder, then, that the people of Babylon almost immediately gifted her the title “Lady of the Shining Dawn.”

As we were cleaning up after our breakfast, a blast of trumpets caught our attention, and we watched as the drawbridge across a narrow part of the Euphrates lowered and Nabu rode across to our side of the river. He was an almost nightly visitor in the camp, bringing us greetings from various officials and people of interest in the city. And gifts! The locals seem to love giving the aristocracy presents, and we were already growing wealthy from the amount of gold we’d been gifted. Savannah was given most of the gold – jewelry, horse tack, veils, and other clothing accessories. My gifts were mostly silver, to go along with the silver streaks in my hair and my black-and-white horse. I was pretty happy with the attention, to tell the truth.

Nabu was surrounded by an honor guard, who provided a barrier between the Crown Prince and the rest of the world. Nabu sported a crown and wore a full set of mail-and-leather armor. I’d never seen him so gussied-up prior to this. He looked regal, handsome, and very formidable. “Glad I’m on his side!” I thought I thought to myself.

“Ah,” Mysti interjected, “but is he on yours?”

“Girl, just don’t go interjecting cryptic warnings when we’re on the verge of entering his family’s Sacred City!” I chided her.

“Don’t take anything for granted from here in!” she cautioned me, “There are powerful allies and friends you have yet to meet across the river - as well as enemies!”

“Actually – I owe you a great deal of gratitude for your warnings,” I told my magic horse. “Thank you for preventing me from sleepwalking into that den of depravity and graft.”

I was about to mount up and ride out to greet Nabu, when his retinue came to a halt easily a full furlong from our breakfast dune. Nabu’s honor guard’s leader dismounted, along with another guard. The Captain of the Guard took Nabu’s horse’s reins firmly in his grasp, nodded to his co-hort on the opposite side of Nabu’s beautiful, black Arabian, and they proceeded to walk across the distance toward us, while the rest of the Royal Guard took up protective positions to his flanks and rear.

“M’Lord…?” Savannah began to ask. I reached over and took her hand.

“No worries, dear,” I explained to my Goddess concubine. “Nabu is on Official Royal House Business. And this is how he greets honored guests and visiting Royalty while acting in his capacity as Crown Prince of the Realm.”

“Come,” I urged her. “Accompany me to go out to greet him.” I didn’t tell her that for her **not** to would be an insult to the Royal House – a sign I didn’t trust them. I turned to signal for Nanshe to join us as well. No need, though - she was already in position on my left. She was busy strapping a sword to her side, within her riding cloak. I was wearing a sword as well as the Gizmos on my arms. Savannah had a sheathed dirk affixed to her exposed thigh – the one exposed while she rode.

I needed Nanshe along to prevent me from making any blunders in etiquette in what was about to transpire between my House and the Royal House of Babylon. For us to appear before the Prince and his guard unarmed – for example - would be…foolish, to say the least. If our parties were suddenly ambushed, the guards and Nabu himself would be in the uncomfortable position

of having to defend us. Having our own weapons visibly at the ready demonstrated our willingness and ability to defend ourselves.

Writing this now – it seems like a Fairy Tale: Camped alongside the Euphrates River, about to be issued a formal greeting by none less than the Crown Prince himself, before being officially invited to cross the river into Babylon itself, and be formally greeted by an Emperor and living God! I mean, stuff like this is completely alien to the life I lived. Which was over. So, was I ready to begin my "new" life in earnest, I wondered? Then took a deep breath and answered myself: "As ready as I'll ever be."

We approached Nabu's Royal retinue on foot. I'd merely dropped Mysti's reins on the ground. Even though she likely knew more than I did about what was going on. She lived in the Royal Stables, after all. She pretended to graze on the tall grasses which grew all around the dunes, but made sure she was within earshot of us.

Nabu could not take his eyes off Savannah. I looked her way and gave her hand a squeeze as we closed the distance between ourselves and Nabu's party. She looked to me and smiled. I dropped her hand, after I kissed it. When we closed to within 30 feet or so of one another, the Captain of the Guard signaled his men to halt. They reined their horses to a standstill, then dismounted as one. An impressive sight! They stepped off their mounts, found solid footing, then took a knee. Still in lock-sync. Such discipline! I was quite impressed.

The Captain remained where he was standing, while Prince Nabu slid off his horse, into the sand, and began to approach us on foot. When he had almost come alongside the Captain, the leader of the Royal Guard dropped Nabu's horse's reins, so as to enable him to march ahead of the Prince by a full step. His colleague on Nabu's other flank matched his Captain, step-for-step. Another guard stepped up to take Nabu's horse's reins and follow along, a few steps behind the trio.

We were about ten feet apart when the Captain held up a cautionary hand. "Halt!" he directed all present. Except for Nabu, who strode up to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with his Guard's Officers.

"Lord Gaian, I present to you Lord Nabu, Crown Prince to the Throne of the Babylonian Empire, Lord of Wisdom and Learning, the Undefeatable!" the Captain bellowed, then he and his fellow officer-of-the-guard drew their swords and held them aloft, in front of their faces.

I whispered to Savannah "Curtsy!" while I took a knee and lowered my eyes to the sand before me. I took a quick glance towards Nanshe, who after the briefest of curtsies, rose to walk past me a half-step.

"Worthy Prince, I present to you Gaian, First Wizard of the Everywhen, the Resurrector. And his companion, She who Defies Death, Lady Savannah of the Shining Dawn." After the introductions, Nanshe dropped to her knees and bowed her head, one hand clutched above her heart.

"You may rise," Nabu graciously allowed. We did as instructed. Nabu took a scroll from a cannister slung around his shoulders, popped one end open, and pulled out a parchment.

"Greetings, Gaian!" Nabu shouted at us. "You and your household are hereby summoned to the Royal Banquet Room tomorrow, after High Noon! Upon your reception, there will be feasting and music for the following three days and nights, in honor of your visit.

“Please accept these gifts as tokens of the esteem we hold you and yours in already, and may tomorrow bring you nothing but glad tidings and blessings, by the grace of Lady Damkina, and the House of Enki, my father.

“Signed and sealed by His Royal Highness, Lord Marduk – Emperor of Babylon, Mightiest of the Ancients, Conqueror of…” Nabu broke from formal etiquette and waved the parchment in front of his face, as he returned it to the cannister, then slipped its carrying strap over his head, so as to hand the entire contraption over to me.

“Blah, blah…” Nabu finished his speech. He quickly closed the distance between us, and grasped my free arm with one hand, pulled me close, and slapped my back with his free hand. I responded likewise.

We had only seen one another yesterday afternoon, but he was very glad to be able to slip out of formal court etiquette and relax with his friends. He motioned for several of his guards to ride forward to take the afore-mentioned gifts to our camp.

After we had all found our mounts again, we rode back to camp. I was enraptured with the way Babylon seemed to be floating down the river – its higher walls and towers reflected in the water while we rode upstream. I was in danger of being overcome with vertigo, so I took to chatting with Nanshe, while Nabu flirted it up with Savannah.

I mentioned that to her, once back in our private tents. “Honey,” I offered, half in jest and half-seriously, “do I need to release you from my service so you can marry Nabu? Has he made a proposal yet? I’m sure one’s forth-coming.”

“My Lord!” she blushed. “I like him just fine, but I sort of consider myself married to you!” she elucidated. While she blushed a bright reddish pink seldom seen in this realm. I just decided not to mention her on-going fling with Nanshe.

“Well, as long as you are considered my concubine, there will be no marriage proposals forthcoming.” I told her. “You may never find a good husband. For reals!”

The rest of the day was spent packing up our things for the move into the Grand Palace. There was an end-of-camp party, and once everything was packed away, the remaining camp servants, our musician friends, Nabu and his Royal Guards all partied until the following dawn. It wasn’t a wild party, but lots of fun - sealing new-found friendships with toasts, exchanging flattery through toasts, trying to one-up one another with toasts. And I got to play music and sing in preparation for a possible command performance in front of the Emperor.

Entering the Gates of Babylon

When the dawn finally arrived, Nanshe and Savannah slipped away to bathe, before we all got down to the serious business of preparing our mounts and selves for a formal court appearance before the ruler of the city and living God, Lord Marduk.

Savannah had been given an outfit just for the occasion; a veil made of golden thread, with matching, over-the-elbow gloves, several bangles and upper-arm bracelets. Her dress likewise was made with golden thread, and her thigh-high riding boots were gold-leafed. She bore an intricate gold necklace, with a stone of Lapis Lazuli at its center. The way Nanshe did up Savannah's hair – intertwined with her veil – it looked all the world like she was a golden statue, come to life. Nanshe could not restrain herself from taking out her pocket knife and shredding some of the veil's threads into confetti, which she held in her palm and blew onto Savannah's face and hair, so she sparkled. The sparkling was most pronounced when she smiled a big, toothy smile. All-in-all, Savannah looked too beautiful to be real. Yet, there she was – a walking, talking, gilded statue of a Goddess.

Nabu made some final comments to the head of the caravan which contained our personal possessions as well as the accoutrements for the camp. Then he sent it off along its way to the city gates.

As his horse trotted over to join us – Nanshe, Savannah, and I had waited to mount up until the caravan got moving – Nabu called over to me "I'm expected to ride ahead of your House, but that's just not my style. Also, you keep such charming company!"

He, of course, was dead-on-the-mark with that comment. Nanshe looked so hot, if it weren't for the fact that she rode alongside a Golden Goddess, her appearance would be enough to cause tongues to waggle – at the very least. She had the ponies' manes decorated to match their riders' appearances. The effect was stunning. I mean, the *ponies* looked absolutely magnificent, but with their riders, they merely looked like fashionable accessories. (*And don't **ever** let them know them I said so! Ponies can really carry grudges.*)

Nabu continued, "But, etiquette can be served by me riding a half-a-head's length ahead of you, so we can speak when necessary.

"Also," he added with a grin, "I want to see your faces as we make our way through the gates, into the city. And later, into the Palace!"

We walked our mounts at a leisurely pace, in order to let the caravan outpace us. Nabu insisted we needed space between us and the caravan. Behind us rode the Honor Guard. Mostly behind us. A phalanx of seven Royal Guards preceded us along the entire journey.

The ranks of the Rearguard thinned at a couple of junctures. When one rider was forced to break ranks with the others in order to prevent an intruder from reaching us, he was not allowed to re-enter the formation. Anytime a guard broke ranks, he would dismount and follow along behind us on foot, then continue to the stables, after we'd reached our destination. So much protocol to be followed! I suppose there are good reasons behind it all, but there's just no way I could remember it all. I suppose one must be raised within their culture for it to come naturally.

When the tail end of the caravan passed over the drawbridge, it immediately raised, and the gates of the city's extreme outer walls swung shut. We were a mere furlong away from the river banks at the time.

As our mounted party approached, the entire front phalanx, along with Nabu, raised conch shells to their lips and blew a blast of noise towards the gates. From atop the walls came a flourishing reply of trumpets. The gates swung open and the drawbridge lowered again to allow us to cross the Euphrates. We had not had to slow our approach for even one step. And those gates! They must weigh a dozen tons apiece! Not to mention the drawbridge! Again, I was impressed with the discipline and timing of Marduk's soldiers and their actions.

The caravan had just disappeared into the shadows of the city when we crossed the river and descended onto the far bank.

"Enjoy your last few lungsful of fresh air!" Nabu called to us. "Once inside, the smells of waste can be overwhelming." He swiveled around in his saddle to let us hear him better. "We've made nothing short of heroic efforts to clean the place up for your grand entry."

Nanshe informed us, "The fact that you come alone – no armed guard, except for the Royal Guard Marduk himself chose as our escorts - only adds to your mystique. The people therefor can only take you as a friend of the Household! They all feel compelled to put their best foot forward in order to greet you!"

Nabu further elucidated, "But, you carry no Royal title – AND you travel without armed escort. This attests to your level of confidence, your power, your position in the Grand Scheme of Things! We've never hosted such a friend before – this is without precedent. When Kings and Emperors come to visit, they both try to downplay their own wealth and power, ***and*** make a great show of presenting Father with elaborate gifts. Yet, they travel with an army, which is ***extremely*** expensive.

"And, of course," he added, "it's a different matter altogether when a distant ruler is marched here in chains!" He had to laugh at that thought.

We'd transversed the road which led directly to the front gates of the city proper. Again, they swung shut as we rode towards them. These gates made the ones at the drawbridge seem puny, by comparison. The phalanx ahead of us once again blasted a wave of noise toward the gates, which was answered once again by trumpets atop the walls. The massive gates swung open again.

Inside, two rows of foot soldiers lined both sides of the main avenue through the city. There were thousands of people in the streets, desperate to catch a glimpse of Nanshe and Savannah. Almost as many waved to us from windows and balconies. Their cheers created a great fury of sound. When the gate re-opened to allow us egress, the foot soldiers snapped to attention and performed an about-face pirouette, then interlocked their shields to form a makeshift wall between the crowds and our little party.

When we passed through the gates and out from its and the wall's shadows, the sunlight virtually exploded onto Savannah. Shining Dawn be damned! It was high noon, and the sunlight which poured over her and reflected from her hair and clothing made it look as if the sun itself were riding alongside me. I had to shield my eyes - she glowed so fiercely, it hurt to look at her! People rent their garments and fell to their knees. Many present felt their eyes were being punished by a sight they were unworthy of viewing. Thousands of Babylonians hit the ground, prostrate, almost as one.

Nabu took out his conch, so I did, too! The rearguard saw us raise our conches and did likewise. We blasted a tremendous noise towards the gate's walls. From above, a blast of conches so loud as to cause my ears to ring answered. The Babylonians rose to their feet, mostly. Some were still too overcome with emotion, they could only gain their knees. People were weeping, and confetti and flower petals began to flutter to the ground all around us. People in the high windows tossed colorful streamers into the air. Such a festive greeting!

"Bless us, Lady Savannah!" a woman's voice called out above the din of the crowd. Savannah's head pivoted at the sound of her name. She gave a huge, toothy smile and blew a kiss in the direction the voice had come from.

The horses startled at the response. It was actually too loud to hear, at first. When my ears adjusted, they didn't hear the crowd so much as they registered a loud, ambient white noise. It hurt my ears, it was so loud. Savannah's big, Mediterranean blue eyes grew round. I'm not certain if that was due to astonishment or fear. Nanshe whisper-shouted something to her Lady. Savannah just kept looking around, eyes wide open.

A little girl made her way between the legs of some of the guards. She carried a bouquet of roses of many, many colors. Savannah didn't hesitate – she trotted her pony over to greet the child before anything untoward happened to her, like being roughly escorted back into the crowd by an overly-zealous soldier. The girl held up the bouquet, which Savannah took and immediately hugged to herself, while she took a tremendous whiff of the roses. She hurriedly attached the bouquet to the golden scabbard she wore on her exposed thigh. When she was finished, she took a golden pin from her hair and tossed it to the child. When the child caught it, Savannah reached down, grabbed the girl, and swung her up, so they could sit together as we continued our ride through the city.

I would not have thought it possible, but the roar from the crowds grew louder. I was worried my ears would start bleeding. Many horses chaffed at their bits, and might have bolted, if not for the mastery of Marduk's mounted soldiers. Nanshe's pony looked panicked, but she stroked the mare's neck and cooed into her ears until the frightened pony settled down.

We approached the gates to the Royal City – where the main temples and Palace were. Again, the gates swung shut before we made our way there, only to be opened again by a flurry of conch-shell blasts and the respondent flourish of trumpets, which sounded puny and far-away to my poor, tired, old, abused ears. A drawbridge also had to be lowered, as the Euphrates took a sharp turn, and Marduk had the Royal Palace built across the river from the rest of Babylon.

There were lines of soldiers inside, similar to the ones which lined the avenue we rode along. When the gates swung open again, the soldiers snapped to attention as one and held their lances at the ready. The crowds here were almost as thick as the ones in the city proper. But much more well-dressed. And the smell wasn't nearly as bad as it had been for our entrance, which almost made me want to cover my face with a kerchief. I refrained from doing so because it would be offensive to the Babylonians and make me look prissy, too. Not the proper first impression a War Wizard would desire to make upon his friends and allies.

Despite their apparent wealth, the crowds inside the Palace walls were every bit as rowdy as the commoners. The foot soldiers used their lances to form a makeshift fence to keep the citizens back. I think we were all feeling a bit cautious about inter-acting with the crowds at that point.

The path ahead became a wide avenue as we passed by the main temples of worship. The entire priesthood, along with their families, scribes, and monks stood upon the steps of the main

temple – which had to be Marduk's. Affixed to it was a smaller temple, that of Sarpanit. Her High Priestess and accompanying Priestesses and Temple Maidens were arrayed along the steps as well. Nabu reined his horse to a stop at the foot of the stairs, and motioned for us to join him.

The noise was still too much for me to hear what was going on, but Nabu made a great showing of introducing Sarpanit's High Priestess and Marduk's High Priest to us. They both descended the stairs to stand before us. When they were in place, the High Priest and Priestess put their arms forward and lowered their eyes in slight bows. The rest of those gathered on the stairs fell to their knees, sat back upon their heels, and also stretched their arms forward, heads bowed. We gave a slight bow in return, and the High Priest pulled a gift from out of his cloak to present to me. The High Priestess did likewise with Savanah. I didn't see what Savannah was presented with, but I was given what I call a Lightning-Bolt Thrower.

"Careful with that thing!" Nabu admonished me. I was too transfixed by the gift to pay him much mind. I'd never seen a working one, to the best of my knowledge. And this one was scaled down for use by a Human.

"Look," I showed Nabu, as I held it aloft in the arm with the Gizmo. "It's as if the two were made to supplement one another!" The Bolt-Thrower has an end that fit neatly, up against the inner curve of the Gizmo. When I held it aloft, the Gizmo whined until white bands lit up around its wrist. A bolt of white plasma blasted out of the tip of the Bolt-thrower, high into the clear skies above us, as Mysti nervously pranced around.

"Whoa!" I said, and the energetic outburst immediately ceased. When the plasma burst reached the ionosphere, it spread out along its underside and dispersed. The air around me sizzled, and static electricity popped at random all around. Gold flakes began to drift to the ground. That blast had been amazingly powerful - enough so it turned everything it touched into gold! And I didn't know how either the Gizmo or Bolt-thrower worked. Imagine what they could do if I put my mind to it! I shivered with new-found power, and tried not to cackle like a madman. Instead, I again bowed to the High Priest, who's eyes were round with amazement.

Then, we were on our way to the end of our long, very eventful journey. The crowds were a little quieter now. The phenomena they'd just witnessed was beyond their understanding, and they gazed above, as the plasma stream dispersed into the highest reaches of the atmosphere.

The phalanx of mounted guards before us parted and dismounted. Two remained behind, on foot. The Captain handed his mount off to his subordinate, after they dismounted. The second-in-command took the reins of their horses and began the trek to the Royal Stables. The Captain held the reins of Nabu's horse, before the Prince slid off. The Captain began the trek to the stables, too, after exchanging salutes with the Prince.

Nanshe jumped off her pony to hold Savannah's. She helped the child riding with Savannah dismount, and took her by the hand. Nabu strolled over and held his arms up to offer the Shining Dawn assistance with dismounting. She dutifully slid off her saddle and into his steadying grasp. He held her aloft for a second, before he set her on the ground. She wobbled a little, but quickly recovered her feet. Nanshe, meanwhile, sashayed over to take Mysti's reins in her hand, which also held the reins to Savannah's, and her own, ponies.

With Mysti properly restrained, I slid off the saddle and onto the grounds of the Grand Palace.

On the stairway which led into Marduks' Grand Hall, he stood there, looking very much like a living God/Emperor. Empress Sarpanit stood next to him, and next to her stood Nanaya. The

two Ladies were exceedingly gorgeous today, but were both second-fiddle to Savannah. Still outside, it looked for all the world as if a piece of the sun had descended into Babylon.

After motioning for Savannah and me to lag behind him, Nabu approached his parents. Nanshe, in the meanwhile, was leading our mounts and Savannah's new-found friend off to the stables. Nabu turned towards his parents.

"Lord and Emperor Marduk, Lady and Empress Sarpanit" he shouted. I could scarcely hear him, the ringing in my ears was so loud.

"Lords and Ladies of the Court! I present to you Gaian, First Wizard of the Everywhen, the Resurrector; Gaian the ***Invincible***!" Not knowing what else to do, I waved a hand to the crowd, then strode over to stand directly before the Royal Couple. I took a knee, held a fist to my heart, and bowed my head. The crowd ate it up. Even with my hearing still at a loss, I could hear cries of "Hail, Gaian!" within the babbling cheers of the crowd.

"And his companion – She who Defies Death, the Mistress of Mercy, Lady Savannah of the Shining Dawn!" Nabu finished the introductions. The crowd roared for good now. Savannah made a quick flourish of waves, blew kisses to the crowd, then raced to my side and likewise took a knee as she curtsied.

Seeing us put ourselves in supplication to the city's patron God and Goddess was overwhelming for many in the crowd. They rent their (expensive!) clothing, cried, and a great number of them fell to their knees.

"Come," Sarpanit summoned us. "Refresh yourselves from your journeys." She motioned behind her as a couple of servants began to pull a tapestry aside to reveal the entrance to an inner hallway.

She turned and began to enter the hallway behind the huge tapestry, suspended from the walls behind the stairway. Marduk took her hand in passing and walked alongside his amazingly beautiful, regal-looking wife. Nabu took Nanaya's hand as he strode up to her and they exchanged greeting kisses. What could I do but take Savannah's hand and likewise follow the Royal Couples? Just as we reached the top of the stairs, I had her turn around and face the crowd. "Slight bow," I suggested. We gave the Babylonian Elite a head bow, and they went nuts again.

Nabu laughed at us. "Tch! Such pandering!" he said as we caught up to him and his date. The tapestry effectively dampened the noise from outside, and the marble walls of the interior reflected sound well, so it was a bit easier to hear one another. And it was considerably cooler there. **And** less smelly!

A Little Break

As Sarpanit ushered us to a knot of sofas, Marduk reached for a velvet rope and gave it a tug.

“We have some official business to attend, first.” Marduk stretched and let out a mighty yawn. “The one you call ‘Sin’ has sent a messenger for you. I’ve summoned him.”

He leaned his head towards me. I scooted closer to hear what he had to say. “You can speak with the messenger further away, so as to exchange messages in private.”

“No need, my friend,” I assured him. Then I stretched and yawned, too. It had been an eventful morning, and I truly needed refreshment. Also, we’d not slept the night before – the end-of-camp party had been too much fun to leave. I was hungry, my throat parched, and I needed to sit on something that didn’t move.

Several servants entered. Each one carried a tray laden with a dazzling assortment of nuts, dried fruits and meats. Also, much wine. There were even wine flutes packed in shaved ice. Such decadent luxury! I could get used to this.

Wine bottles were uncorked and the wine portioned out to all around.

Nanshe arrived just in time to claim a chilled glass for herself. She was accompanied by a very formal-looking messenger.

I stood and took a step away from the sofas where Sarpanit, Savannah, Nanshe, and Nanaya were busy exchanging their viewpoints of the day’s events.

“Aren’t you the fellow who gave me the invitation?” I asked. The question made the messenger uneasy. To him, our interaction occurred only three days ago. Or, three days and a week ago. Something like that. Damned if I knew.

“Yes, sir – I am he!” he responded, somewhat exasperated.

“Ah – and I suppose the new job is a step up in your career path?” I inquired.

“Yes, Lord Gaian, it certainly is! The only position higher would be as Messenger Select of His Imperial Highness, Emperor Anu!” he bragged.

“Hmm,” I appraised. “And your mount? Were you allowed to keep the same mount – he seemed like the decent sort!” I tried to sweat him a little there, I must admit.

“No, sir,” he replied, the wind obviously taken from his sails. “I am compelled to use a horse from the Royal Stables.” He looked a little queasy at this point. “But, I believe that mount is available for purchase, from the messenger service Lady Ninkasi employs.”

“AH!” I declared, “This information pleases me very much. I suppose I can overlook the fact that you were a complete ass to me when we first met...”

The background chatter came to a sudden pause. The messenger cast a worried look the Ladies’ way. I continued: “…and congratulate you on your new position.

“Speaking of – do you have a message for me?” I asked him.

“Lord Gaian!” he clicked his heels together. “His Royal Majesty, Lord Ninurta, inquires as to whether you have something you wish to communicate to him.”

I noted the fact that Lord Ninurta didn’t have anything to say to me, then answered, “Yes! I do have a message to convey to His Lordship of Nippur. Tell him ‘Give me a reason!’ That is all.”

Before the messenger could make his way out of our presence, I offered, “You know…I think it might be wise for you to look for employment elsewhere. The aristocrats really don’t enjoy receiving bad news. I think you may be more aware of that than anyone.

“But, I seem to be short on staff at the moment. I’m certain I could use a top-notch, experienced Messenger. Who knows what opportunities await as I begin to open my Sacred Halls and Grotto to the public! This is a real ground-floor opportunity for the right person! Of course, you’d have to provide your own mount.”

He suddenly looked very cunning and calculating. I liked what I saw, and was immediately relieved I’d not made a terrible mistake.

“Yes, m’lord!” he said. “I may take you up on this offer! As my former steed likes to say, ‘The sky’s the limit!’”

We both chuckled a little at that, and I was further relieved to see that he wasn’t one-dimensional. His smile and laugh came readily and easily.

“Very well!” I remarked “You can find me here for the time being. I doubt I’ll dally as long as a week. I was in the middle of a party when Lord Marduk invited me along to Babylon!”

“Then, I’ll be certain to return before then!” he said, and snapped his heels together. As he parted, his gait was totally different from what it was prior to our brief encounter. Before, he was all sterile efficiency. Now, he walked with a swagger on the verge of becoming brashness. He all but sprinted from the narrow hallway.

When I returned to drink wine and chit-chat with the others, a familiar aroma wafted in the nearly breezeless air of the inner chamber.

“That has to be SDLA!” I noted to myself. It had a very flowery scent, with an undertone of dank Kush. My favorite weed of all time!

Nanaya made herself useful. She rolled joints, lit them, and passed them around. This was slightly out of character for her. From what I'd heard about her, she preferred to lounge around, look beautiful, and be adored. As far as rankings go, she was the least amongst us. I would be, except for the marriage to two full-fledged Goddesses.

As far as *that* goes, it's difficult to rank Eris. She's a remnant of one of only a few Primordial Beings, Tiamat. She was actually created by the actions of one of the Ancients. So, is she still a Primordial Being, or is she part of the first (or second, even) generation of the Ancients? There's never been any sort of official proclamation about that, and Eris isn't even interested.

Also, Savannah outranked everyone present, except Marduk, and myself – himself one of the first generation of the Ancients. Savannah's mother is Ki – another one of the Primordial Beings, from which the Ancients and the Titans were descended. Savannah Dawn is therefor Marduk's Auntie. His father, Enki, was one of the Truly Ancients. And even so, Marduk only out-ranked Savannah because we were in his Sacred City. Anywhere else, and she out-ranked him. And, since I sorta **own** my daughter/concubine Savannah, I outrank her. (*Weird, huh? It took me a long while to get all this sorted out. One of the reasons I needed a break earlier.*)

And, though both of Nanaya's parents are amongst the Ancients, none are quick to claim her. Like many of the minor Goddesses associated with her, she has never married. Though they were all associated with love. More like the sexual attraction type of love.

I can only imagine Nanaya's parents admonishing her to be more like "*Goddess X*," who has many children and grandchildren. And Nanaya explaining to her parents that she's having far too much fun to get married. As far as looks go – she can outshine all but a few Goddesses. She and Sarpanit are on the same level, as far as beauty standards of the Ancients go, and either can get dolled up in fine, flattering clothes, then splash on makeup until they are just jaw-droppingly gorgeous. And look very, extremely sexy when they do so.

Nanaya stopped rolling out the joints at four. Considering there were but seven of us sharing them around, she was being quite generous. Nabu offered me one. "This one is SDLA, one of the others is the Colombian Red-hair, while the other two are a mix of both," he told me.

I sat between him and Savannah, who was being fed treats and snacks by Nanshe, so as to keep Savannah Dawn's nails pristine. Savannah was clearly unhappy about the arrangement, until Nanshe took a deep, deep toke of one of the hybrid joints and kissed Savannah Dawn in order to blow the smoke into her mouth. I mean – one really doesn't understand what it means to look "hot" until one has seen Nanshe kiss Savannah Dawn, while thick smoke drifts from between their lips and out their nostrils. **THAT'S** Hot.

I decided to bogart the SDLA joint. It was the smallest of the four, by the time I rejoined the others. There were still about two pounds apiece of the SDLA and Colombian Red-hair left at Ninkasi's Hootenanny (*last I checked*), and I was very happy to learn they were so well-thought of, Beings were sneaking choice buds away.

SDLA/Colombian Red-Hair – that sounds like a revolutionary operative to me. I kept the wisecrack to myself, seeing as how I was likely the only one who would get it. Things like that make me feel lonely.

"I don't see how our grand entrance could have gone any better," I offered instead.

"Honestly, Gaian!" Marduk began to explain. Sarpanit cut him off.

“Our wedding parade! When the Babylonians first met me!” She ticked off one finger.

Nabu ticked off two fingers, “Father’s return from exile!”

Nanaya ticked off three fingers, “And His Royal entrance just a week ago!”

“Those are the only receptions comparable to the one you received today,” Marduk summarized.

“The people of Babylon already venerate you – they’ve named you ‘the Resurrector’ in the hope that you will bring back a chance for peace amongst Humans - and the Ancients as well!” Sarpanit informed me.

“But…’the Invincible’?” I asked, for clarity’s sake, as I took a deep toke from the SDLA joint. Nabu and Marduk spit out their tokes with fits of laughter and coughing.

While they recovered their composure, Nanaya disclosed “That’s because you socked Marduk on the jaw!”

“And lived to tell about it...for a while, at least,” Sarpanit finished, a playful glint to her eyes.

“There are those who think Ninkasi killed you because you slighted her Royal House!” Nabu informed me, and everyone was overcome with laugh/coughs again. Except for me. I was very unamused.

“Is it really so obvious that I’m dead?” I had to ask.

“You certainly haven’t shown any signs of being dead at night!” Savannah Dawn bragged on me. So far, she hadn’t paid much mind to any talk about us being dead and such. From what I’m told - to Mortals, I would appear to be all shiny - if they could see me at all. And to Immortals, I would appear as I so desired, but my aura would shine around me, like a celestial shroud of sorts. Even as a Mortal, there were times when my aura shone so brightly as to cast shadows.

Nanshe had been in the process of feeding some fruit preserves to Savannah when Lady Dawn remarked about me. Nanshe was overcome with laugh/coughing and spilt some of the preserves onto Savannah’s shoulder. When she recovered sufficiently, Nanshe began to clean the spill off her Lady with kisses. Sloppy, juicy kisses. Savannah squealed. And squirmed.

“Gaian!” Marduk complained. “Do you have any idea how difficult it is to find decent help these days?”

Sarpanit elucidated, “If we show any signs of displeasure or lose our tempers because of the servants, sometimes one of them will run off and kill themself, because they offended the ‘Gawds!’” She crossed her eyes when she said “Gawds!”

“*Nanshe!*” Marduk chastised his servant-on-loan. She promptly rose to her feet, and trotted over to kneel before Marduk, her arms outstretched before her, her face to the floor.

“Yes, m’lord!” she reported when in proper position.

“Your behavior with our guests is entirely too familiar!” he scolded her before he took in a deep toke.

Sarpanit filled in for him, “Why, we have every right to dismiss you from our service, your behavior is so scandalous!”

“It shall be as my Lord and Lady desire,” she reminded them. She was trying not to laugh.

“Very well, then!” Marduk exclaimed upon regaining his composure and letting out a massive cloud of smoke. “Nanshe, you are hereby banished from our staff!”

“Oh, my Lord…” she began to object, but was cut off by Sarpanit.

“You are hereafter to remain by the side of Lady Savannah of the Shiny Dead Thingy.” Sarpanit took another toke from one of the hybrid joints. “’ow’d ja like dat?” she asked.

Nanshe could not reply, she was laughing so much. Still, she kept her face to the floor, so no one would know. Like we couldn’t see her entire upper body quivering with the effort.

“That’ll learn ya!” I said, before taking a final, huge puff from the SDLA joint.

Which was just too much for poor Nanshe, who rolled onto her side with a fit of the giggles. Nanaya cough/laughed her toke away. Savannah, meanwhile, was having none of it.

“**Nanshe!**” she reprimanded her new servant-for-life, who gathered herself together enough to jump up and trot over to sit at Savannah Dawn’s feet. Savannah handed her the Red-hair joint.

“You spoil her still!” Marduk pretended to be angry.

“Oh, we’re going to spoil her brains out tonight!” Savannah threatened, then looked to her shoulder, then back to Nanshe, who dutifully responded by smearing some fruit preserves on her Lady’s neck and shoulder and set about licking them off. The rest of us squirmed in our seats. Not so much as Savannah Dawn did, mind you.

“Not that I’m not already envisioning what is sure to follow if we leave the ladies to their pleasure, but it’s time to proceed into the Sacred Hall and start to feasting,” Sarpanit stated. She was apparently being overcome with the munchies.

Nanaya held things up for a second. “Gaian, why did you offer that messenger a job, after you mentioned he’d previously offended you?”

Her question caught me mid-swallow, as I wanted to wash the ganja oil out of my mouth with some of the strong, sweet wines on offer.

Nabu filled in for me; “He will not soon forget his rude behavior, and will always try to make it up to Gaian.”

“For as long as he remains in my House,” I added. “He also seems like a sharp character, and has some personality.”

“Yes - quick to break free of Courtliness and speak as himself!” Nabu appraised my new hire. He leaned a little closer towards me. “Let’s just hope he’s as loyal as he is personable!” he cautioned.

“You sound like Mysti!” I poked fun at his wariness.

“Your **HORSE**?!?” Nabu was confused. And maybe more than a little offended.

“My *MAGIC* horse!” I informed him. He scratched his head. “Surely, you knew about her psychic abilities!”

“I thought her abilities were exaggerated,” he explained.

A shadowy figure appeared at the opposite end of the little hallway. “I’m ready to introduce you all, when you are ready,” the Court Jester announced.

“We’re on our way!” Marduk pronounced as he rose from his seat. He held out a hand to assist Sarpanit, who took one last toke from a hybrid joint, before she snuffed it out. The King helped his Queen find her footing a few seconds later. And again, a few seconds afterwards.

We were all staggered by the weed. Not my two favorites for no reason. They really pack a punch – and we had all received a standing eight-count.

Not Funny!

As we entered the grand banquet room, the Jester strode out to the opening between the Thrones and Royal Table – reserved for friends, honored guests, and family - and the rest of the guests’ tables. We were escorted to our proper places – Savannah Dawn, Nanshe and I sat to the King’s left, after a mysterious, vacant seat.

To the Queen’s right sat her son and his date, then the High Priest and Priestess. As we made our ways to our proper places, the Jester made his way to the space between the Royal table and the rest of those gathered.

“Ladies and Gentlemen of the court!” he announced. “Honored guests and visitors! My Lord and Lady – it is with great pleasure that I introduce you to our esteemed visitors!

“I’m certain everyone here has noticed the lovely Nanaya – who today lives up to her reputation as ‘the Irresistible!’” Nanaya raised a glass of wine in salute, and cheers arose from those in attendance.

“Here sits Lord Gaian, the Resurrector,” he exclaimed, then added, “There are those who call him ‘the Invincible!’

“Alas,” he continued in mock sadness, “we may never know if it is so! Absolutely *no one* seems to be in hurry to ascertain the truth for himself.” A tittering of laughter leaked out from those seated around the Grand Hall.

“Accompanying him is his lovely companion, Savannah of the Shining Dawn!” There was a brief pause while people made wolf whistles and catcalls. Savannah blushed. “There are those who

name her ‘She who Defies Death!’” I didn’t like his change of tone. He suddenly sounded like a magistrate.

“There are also those who call her ‘abomination!’” he concluded, as he pivoted around and threw a dagger at Savannah.

My Gizmos had already begun to rev up by then, so when I flicked my finger towards the path of the dagger, it up-ended and flew back the way it came from so quickly, it was as if it had been launched from a bow. The Jester had no time to react, and the dagger sank into his throat where it connected to his chest – all the way up to the hilt.

The jester tried to cry aloud, swallow, breath, and cough - all at the same time, which only caused the dagger to cut his throat to ribbons, internally. Blood began to sputter and spew from his wound, his nose, and mouth. He could do little but lay on the ground to await his death.

Marduk and Nabu were on their feet immediately, and the Royal Guard poured into the banquet hall to line the walls and block all entrances. “Everyone remain where you are seated!” Marduk commanded, then whispered some instructions to a few guards, then to Nabu. The prince quickly left the hall with the soldiers Marduk had issued orders to.

Meanwhile, I was startled once again, when someone set a rather large flagon of beer beside my plate. My wife Ninkasi stood behind me, giving orders to some of her own servants. “My love!” I exclaimed, not knowing what else to say.

“Marduk gave me an official summon to be here today, and bring along something special for your welcoming

banquet.” I was still confused. He’d murdered their brother, Dummuzi. I could not grasp why she would come here, unless she led an army intent on avenging her dead brother.

“While father is away, Marduk is head of the household.” She explained while keeping a watchful eye on her servants. “This is official family business, I suppose. Everyone’s been very cryptic about his intentions, but I have a feeling it involves you, too.” She quickly walked out of earshot to help move her kegs out of the way for what she foresaw coming.

Like many of the days I’d spent amongst the Immortals, things were happening all around me that I had not a clue about, and happening in rapid succession. Until now, it all seemed like fun and games. But the Court Jester – usually a trusted friend and advisor to the Ruler – had betrayed his Lord. And tried to murder my Divine Concubine. If he had succeeded, he would have been executed, after being tortured to find out the identities of his cohorts and supporters. It was a suicidal mission, one that only a religious zealot could carry out. Or someone who acted under tremendous pressure.

His death was not going to come easily, nor readily, as the grotesque sounds emanating from him demonstrated.

Some of the Royal Guards re-entered the banquet hall, followed by servants who towed a smallish catapult behind them. Nabu entered and handed the soldiers a length of rope, which they promptly used to affix the Jester to the load arm of the catapult. When they were finished, they began to wheel it out the doorway and down the hallway

“Papa!” a child’s voice called out to me. I turned and rose from my seat as little girl Autonomia came running towards me, arms raised for a greeting scoop and hug, which I dutifully gave her.

“Hey, kid!” I greeted her before I covered her face with kisses. She giggled and squirmed.

Rather than question why she was here and how she arrived, I pointed out the dying Jester.

“See that guy?” I asked her. “He just tried to murder Savannah!” I said.

Autonomia was **pissed**.

“Uh-uh!” she scolded no one in particular. “Can’t be doing that to MY big sister!”

And another piece of the puzzle that was my Hereafter was revealed.

“Before he did that, he called her an ‘abomination.’” I further explained. “He said ‘others’ called Savannah ‘abomination,’ too.

“I need you to find out who these ‘others’ are, so we can cut their heads off,” I charged her. “All of them, okay sweetheart?” I asked as I set her down.

“Can I cut their heads off, too?” she asked in that charming, demure way little girls have of asking for favors. “Savannah the Reaper is here! I bet she’d let me borrow her scythe!”

“Well,” I said, not wanting to play favorites. “Maybe she wants to cut their heads off, too!” Little Autonomia gave that some thought.

“I bet there are plenty of heads to cut off, so maybe ya’ll can find them and cut them off together,” I suggested.

“You betcha!” she replied before she ran out of the hall, calling ahead of herself, “Hey! Savannah!”

The Shining Dawn looked a little confused. Nanshe jumped up to stand in front of her, effectively shielding her from further attacks by assailants unknown to us at present. I smiled at Nanshe and she relaxed.

I motioned for Nabu to join me, as I stepped over to his Father’s side. Once he arrived, I stood before the Royal Couple’s Thrones.

“My Lords” I addressed the Royals. I bowed my head and held a hand to my chest, above my heart. Sarpanit rose to her feet, so I included “My Lady! Traitors to Your Majesty’s court have exposed themselves in a plot to attack my House, for what purposes, only the perpetrators know.

“With your leave, I have instructed my House to sort out the culprits and punish them.” As if on cue, heads began to topple from people in attendance. Not very many, I was happy to see. And neither the High Priest nor High Priestess.

Blood spurted out from the headless necks, as most of the bodies toppled over. At least two sat back into their chairs.

Outside, numerous co-conspirators were revealed, when their heads fell from their customary places. Some of the bodies fell over, as one would expect. A few of them continued to walk for a few paces before they tripped over some unseen obstacle or ran into a wall. Their numbers

were few, yet it seemed in places like it was raining blood. Screams and curses were heard throughout the city, though the citizens in the banquet hall were much more accepting of it all. Apparently, such shenanigans are not without precedent in Babylon's Royal Court.

Before it was too late – it takes someone something like eight minutes to completely lose consciousness, after losing one's head – I added: "I dedicate these deaths to our Goddesses in attendance – Empress Sarpanit, Lady Nanaya, Lady Ninkasi, and Lady Savannah!"

Sarpanit immediately raised her hands as if in prayerful praise. Nanaya rose to her feet and did likewise. I looked over to see Nanshe advise Savannah to rise from her seat. She did so, but refused to raise her arms. Because she didn't understand why, she told me later. Ninkasi was nowhere in sight.

As the beheaded began to fade away into the abyss, the Goddesses began to glow. In a little while, the glow faded, and the Ladies returned to normal. Except they had leveled up a bit. Sarpanit's round face wasn't so round anymore, and she was around four inches taller. She later claimed to be the same weight as she was before. Her legs and arms were longer, her face more angular. She wasn't just more beautiful – she was suddenly *astonishingly* gorgeous.

Nanaya grew a few inches. She's around five-feet, ten inches tall now, and a tad bit curvier. Her facial features were somehow much prettier. Hard to describe. She was usually the hottest Goddess in the room, wherever she went. Honestly, she even outshone leveled-up Sarpanit now.

Savannah grew a couple of inches, and lost her teenager prettiness by becoming a little more mature-looking. She was a bit curvier, especially her hips. And she still had the same thick, fleshy lips. But not as many freckles.

Marduk whispered instructions to Nabu, who summoned someone over to meet him as he followed the servants who pushed the catapult and its passenger along the way. Nabu was handed a parchment, which he quickly scribbled a note onto while he chased after the catapult. When he was satisfied with the message, he handed it over to the scribe who'd given the parchment to him, who then scampered off somewhere else.

Once they reached their destination, Nabu instructed the servants to position the catapult so it would dangle the dying traitor over a parapet. To enable most of the city to watch him die. Then he addressed those assembled below.

"People of Babylon! A plot to assassinate our honored and beloved guest, Lady Savannah of the Shining Dawn has been revealed!" He paused a second to allow the citizens within earshot to voice their displeasure, then proceeded: "The plotters have been punished by the House of Gaian the Invincible!" A great cheer greeted this news.

"We will reward those who bring the bodies of these foul blasphemers to the gates of the Royal Treasury: three gold coins for the head, two for the bodies, as they were at the moment of their ends!" he finished.

Those in charge of subsequent investigations into the bodies' identities wanted as much information about who they were and who they associated with as possible. Hopefully, the reward offered for the bodies "as they were" at the moment of their deaths would discourage people from krittling through the dead's pockets and bags. I should have thought of that before I had the girls decapitate them.

As Nabu finished his remarks and returned to the banquet hall, into the place where he'd been standing, an adorable teenage girl appeared. She waved to the crowd below and blew them kisses.

The Jester was aghast. Here he was, slowly drowning in his own blood, between painful spasms caused by coughing fits, as his lungs tried to breath, only to draw in more blood. And *everything* he did made the wound worse.

The pain grew beyond unendurable. He had to make an effort not to breath, but it was impossible. To add to his woes, this little moppet was distracting the crowd from the spectacle of his death – he was being upstaged! The **worse** possible outcome for a performer! Of course, he didn't know the crowd couldn't see her, and she hammed it up by pretending they could. She performed twirling release and catches with an overly large looking scythe. She even twirled it around her neck and waist a few times.

"Wow!" she finally said to the dying man. "**You** pissed someone off!"

She let the scythe come to rest against the catapult. "There's really no reason for you to hang around, you know."

He knew, but he also knew he didn't know how to just go ahead and die. He was afraid to die. Death meant darkness to him. He worried that horrible things awaited his arrival in the darkness.

He slowly lost consciousness and began to fade. Little Reaper Savannah used the scythe to gently rap the Jester on his head.

"You still in there?" she inquired. "See, my little sister is here, too, and we don't really get many chances to hang out together, so I wanna get going."

He was obviously slow on the uptake, but his death rattle came a few seconds afterwards. She gave the scythe a few practice swings. "Stubborn old goat!" she said under her breath.

"C'mon, get going…chicken!" she teased him. "Bwack-buc-bawk!" she said. His soul slowly began to seep out of the wound in his neck. Savannah had run out of patience, though, so when she took another swing, she allowed the blunt side of the scythe to give the soul a little whack. It was enough to get it mostly out of the dead but still warm body, but not to totally dislodge it. So she gave the scythe a mighty swing and knocked the soul right out of him.

The soul went soaring over the walls of the palace, over the city walls, and began to descend. It just cleared the outer walls and splashed down into the Euphrates.

"Whee-hoo!" she appraised her swat. "That was a **good** one!"

Just then, Autonomia ran up. "Hey Savannah!" she called out to her. They exchanged greeting hugs and kisses, then Autonomia informed her of my request. They disappeared.

A Proper Banquet After All

Two bloody girls ran into the banquet hall and over to me to get hugs. I obligingly complied and got covered in blood, too. Girls will be girls, I thought.

“Hey, kids! Good job! Thanks!” I said. Then pointed over to Savannah Dawn. “Hey guess who that is?” I challenged Savannah the Reaper. Savannah looked over to the woman I pointed out. She didn’t make a response, so I told her “It’s YOU!”

“No way!” the Reaper said, and squirmed her way out of my grasp.

When she arrived before Savannah Dawn, Nanshe proclaimed, “Oh, my – look at bloody, little you!”

Savannah was taken aback for a second. “Oh,” she finally said, “are you busy working, bloody, little me?”

“Yeah,” the cutest little Reaper anyone’s never wanted to meet responded, “but I could use a break.”

She flung herself down on Nanshe’s vacant chair. “There’s a terrible war going on across the big mountains! So many dead in each battle! It takes, like*, forever* to reap a day’s worth. I even have to slow time down in order to get it all done. *And* take a nap.”

The Savannahs simultaneously said “It’s so BORING!” then laughed at each other.

“Come along, little Reaper – let’s get you cleaned up!” Nanshe took younger Savannah by the hand and began to lead her towards the doorway.

Meanwhile, Autonomia was having a look around the hall. She suddenly called out, “Hi, Auntie Sarpanit! Wow! You got prettier!” She immediately began to wave more frantically. “Hi, Uncle Marduk! Uncle Nabu!” Ninkasi was away, supervising her servants, so Autonomia didn’t see her immediately.

“Holy fuck, who is *that*?” she suddenly perked up even more. I saw where she was looking, and didn’t even have to check out who she referred to.

“That’s Nanaya!” I informed her.

“Damn, she’s sexy!” Autonomia appraised her.

“Girl, can you **not** think about sex for five minutes?” I asked.

“Not when I look at her, I can’t,” she matter-of-factly informed me.

“Come on, Autie!” Savannah called over to us “We’re getting baths!”

“Look at me!” she pointed to Savannah Dawn when Autonomia joined them and took Nanshe’s free hand.

“I get so pretty!” she marveled. Then sighed, “It’s nice to be me!”

“See that couple over there?” Autonomia asked her half-sister as she pointed out Nabu and Nanaya. “I’m going to find out where their bedroom is and watch them make love.”

“Aw, Sis,” the Reaper scolded her, “Why ya gotta be like that?”

“I’m not being ‘like that!’” Autonomia replied. She tapped a finger to her temple. “I’m gonna take notes!”

Bloody, little Savannah gave that some thought. “In that case, I’ll join you,” she said. “I bet we learn a thing or two!”

Nanshe laughed to herself, as she led them off to our guest suites for their baths.

Just as the girls left the banquet hall, someone who looked vaguely familiar entered. She walked over to the vacant seat next to me, but paused before she sat down. All the background chatter in the hall had come to a halt. I recognized the gal’s scent, though. With all eyes upon her, I sprang to my feet and raised my goblet.

“Everyone! Please join me in welcoming my betrothed, the Goddess of Brewing, Ninkasi!” I called out to the Babylonians. (*I suppose I should explain: when at her Sacred Hall, whatever the Goddess says goes. If she says we’re married, we’re married. However, that doesn’t apply outside her Hall. Not until we exchange vows. In public.*)

“**Praise Ninkasi!**” came the uproarious response. Followed by cheers, after the revelers finished their pints. It had been a long while since she’d visited her brother’s Sacred City. No shattering of glasses after people drained them, though. In most Halls, tossing one’s glass to the floor – or a nearby fireplace – was not the custom. Tossing down the goblet usually meant one has had enough to drink. Ninkasi tends to encourage folks to get rowdy at her festivals. And way-the-fuck drunk.

My Love didn’t have a clue about what was happening, so as the Goddess of Brewing acknowledged the crowd’s praise and took her seat, I snatched a serving platter from a passing servant. The silver tray had been properly burnished for the feast, so it was shiny and highly reflective. I held it in front of Ninkasi’s face. She promptly grabbed it and began to fan herself with it. She was so incredibly beautiful now, she took her own breath away!

“Calm down!” I cooed to her. “Just breathe,” I coached her, “Deep breaths! Breathe in…breathe out.”

Her face slowly began to lose the flush it attained when she saw herself and went into shock.

I took the platter from her hands and handed it back to the serving servant. Though many people contend that

Eris still looks sexier, my darling little wife Ninkasi was suddenly the most amazingly, drop-dead gorgeous Goddess anyone could ever hope to see. Few people in attendance recognized her until I introduced her. Hell, *I* didn’t until I got a whiff of her. She smells of yeast and hops.

(*It's her thing, y'know.*) And don't tell Eris you think she's hotter than our wife. For one thing, if Ninkasi is within her sight, Eris won't really know who or what is around her. (*She can scarcely peel herself off our wife these days. But…getting ahead of the story once again*!)

"Wow!" she finally proclaimed to me, quietly so I was the only one who could hear it. "I may have overdone it for this feast."

I wasn't sure what she meant, so I took her hand and gave it a squeeze. She didn't look at me. She kept her eyes focused on the table's top. She squeezed my hand in return. It kinda hurt. She's a little stronger now, too.

"The brew I brought along here is something I've kept in reserve for a couple of years." She tried to hide her face a little, so I gave her another reassuring squeeze. "I wanted to make sure everyone had a good time, even if the party wasn't going so great. One never knows…

"So, this brew makes one lose inhibitions. And…it…" she blushed. "…makes people really horny. I mean like, uncontrollably, compulsively horny.

"Oh, my heavens!" her eyes suddenly grew round with astonishment. "Look at Nanaya! And Sarpanit!" She turned to have a look at Savannah. "Oh, thank goodness!" She relaxed a bit. "Savannah only looks a little hotter.

"How was I to know?" she asked, perplexed.

"Babe," I began to reassure her. She cut me off.

"Just look at them! Oh, sure – lucky you! - you've ***only*** been in the company of Goddesses for your Hereafter. Did you hear how people greeted Savannah today? Few of them have ever seen such a sight! That was enough to get everyone's juices flowing, so to speak."

"Actually, I didn't hear the uproar her appearance made," I informed my Love. "It was too loud. Almost caused me to go deaf."

"Well, it's too late to do much of anything about it now," she mused, unconcerned about my well-being. She poured beer into another rather large flagon she then handed to me.

"Drink up, mister!" she demanded. "I'm going to fuck you half to death tonight!"

"Not if I do you first!" I threatened.

So, my retort didn't make any sort of sense. It didn't have to: Sense can't be made, it can only be sensed!

As servants began to pour into the Hall in numbers to hand out more beer and platters full of incredibly delicious-smelling food, my musician friends entered and began to take up positions around the Banquet to get the party going with some mellow ballads. Tomorrow night, if all went well, our seven-piece band would take up most of the evening. Right now, though, the revelers needed soothing tunes to get over the gore they witnessed earlier. Indeed, some of the songs in the first set were bawdy, goofy songs about love gone awry. Before they could get going for real, I motioned for their leader, Alain, to come over.

"My friend!" I arose to grasp his wrist

and give him a quick hug. He slapped my back.

“Gaian!” he greeted me, “How’s the luckiest man in Babylon?” He gave a quick glance to Savannah and nodded his chin towards Ninkasi.

“Almost afraid of what’s to come later!” I half-joked. He guffawed at my pretense of worry and slapped my back some more.

“Listen!” I demanded of him. “My wife says tonight’s brew is much like an aphrodisiac. A strong aphrodisiac. You may wish to warn your musicians to stick to wine tonight, or until their resolve wears thin, and they wish to join in with whatever transpires later. At the very least, tell them not to drink any beer until midnight, so you all aren’t docked a night’s wages!”

He laughed and slapped me on the back yet again. “If you say something, I know it to be true – so we’ll stick to wine until midnight.” He looked around, appraisingly. Many of those present had downed two pints of Ninkasi’s special brew already. Belts were loosened. Undergarments were removed - to prevent celebrants from tripping over them as they danced. Shoes and boots were removed and kicked under the tables and chairs. I finally understood why Ninkasi was concerned. Tonight was going to be remembered by all the servants. The participants, not so much…

I was glad to see Alain enforce the “stick to wine” rule with his charges. And the reception party was off to a grand start.

“Gaian, dear!” Ninkasi cooed at me when I returned to my seat. “I’ve instructed Zoe to set up a table of food and drink in our bedroom. It’s where I lived when I was younger, and our father was off on one of his adventures.” I took a sip from the flagon she filled for me.

“It’s great!” she further divulged. “It has a fireplace, AND a flowing fountain, which feeds a pool for bathing…” She leaned over and tugged at my hand to pull me close, and continued, “…and a crystal ceiling, lined with amethyst and rose quartz, and a ridiculously huge bed. Seriously, you just won’t believe the size of the bed.” She relaxed and let her head come to rest on my shoulder, my hand still clasped in hers. I took a larger draw from the flagon.

“Making love under the Milky Way in Babylon!” she sighed. “This is just too freakin’ romantic, and I can’t wait anymore,” she stood and dragged me out of my chair. Upon gaining my feet, I leaned over to take a whiff of her breath. I was certain she was already well along the way toward a night of serious drinking and wanton self-indulgence. And it was still only mid-afternoon! Rather than get a whiff of her breath, though, she kissed the living daylights out of me. Sure enough, she tasted of her strong, sex-positive brew.

“You haven’t even touched your beer yet?” she angrily accused me.

“Darlin’…” I started to lament. She cut me off by pouring beer onto my face. I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or break free of her grip and flee for my Immortal Soul’s sake. But – you know me – give the Goddess what she wants. I dutifully swallowed as much of the brew as I could without choking.

Kids in their Bath

Nanshe rinsed and peeled the bloodied clothes off the girls and dropped them into a wooden box, destined to burn in a rubbish fire.

She caught up a pitcher of water from the fountain and poured it over the girls, to rinse the majority of the blood away. The girls squealed. Nanshe removed her own clothes and placed them in the rubbish box, too.

Satisfied that she had gotten as much of the blood off of them as she could without scrubbing, she had them hop into the pool, then joined them. She used sponges to scrub their skin clean.

Suddenly, Nanshe felt a little dizzy. She had to hold on to the side of the pool in order to prevent herself from slipping under completely. She felt weak. There was a sudden flash of light.

“Wow!” little Autonomia said, “Look at ***you***!”

Savannah declared, “And now it’s **our** turn to wash **you**!” And their hands began to run all over Nanshe’s body.

“Hey!” she protested.

“Don’t I *own* you or something?” Savannah inquired. Nanshe had to admit, she was right.

“I have to admit,” she conceded, “You do!”

“Okay then…” Savannah assessed the situation. And four hands molested Nanshe for a while. They certainly took liberties with where they touched her, and how much attention certain parts of her body received. She could do little but giggle along with them.

“She’s totally into it!” Autonomia appraised. Nanshe gave her one of those “Whatever” looks.

Afterwards, while the girls lounged around on the ridiculously huge bed, Nanshe fashioned some clothes for them, out of a sheet on the bed. There were so many, one wouldn’t be missed. “Come on,” she held out her hands when they were somewhat covered. “Let’s go see the tailors, and get you some proper garments.”

They each took a hand, and made their ways down the hallway.

A Romantic Night in Babylon

Ninkasi began to drag me out of the Banquet Hall. “Savannah!” I cried out. “Please have Nanshe look after the girls for me! I think I’m going to be predisposed until tomorrow!” She nodded and gave me a sweet smile.

“Have fun, you two!” she toasted us as we disappeared into the hallway. She scooted herself along the table until she sat in the place set for Ninkasi.

Ninkasi’s bedroom suite lived up to her hype. We arrived a bit too early for much love-making under the Milky Way. We **did** have a fairly spectacular view of the sunset, though. Her ceiling has an unobstructed view of the sky, and the Milky Way, stars, planets, and constellations slowly rotated by throughout the night. We took a midnight break and bathed together, then settled onto the bed to eat, drink, smoke more ganja, and watch the Heavenly Show in the Sky.

I could not stop marveling at how much more beautiful Ninkasi is than she was the last time I saw her at her place. I determined I was now completely inadequate for her. Something needed to be done about that.

“Hey, clouds!” I shouted as my Goddess wife-to-be lay on her back, watching the sights above and taking puffs from a ridiculously large joint I’d shown her how to roll. “Take me back to Ninkasi’s Halls!”

“Wait!” she protested.

Before I disappeared into the clouds, I let her know “I’ll be right back!”

I still wasn’t sure how things worked around here, so I decided to retrace my steps, when I’d first arrived.

As I began to make my way down the corridor towards the Grand Hall, I thought out loud, “I need to be seven feet tall, with the same proportions and build I have now!”

When I passed one of the polished, marble columns along the way, I saw that things were as I desired. “And how about a tattooed mask, across my face, just large enough to cover my eyelids, and extended to my lower temples?” Again, it was as I desired.

“Now, let’s go see how my love likes this! Get me back to her bedroom in Babylon, less than a second after I left.”

Ninkasi let out a squeal and threw me down on her ludicrously huge bed. She ripped my clothes to bits in her hurry to undress me.

“Dear GOD!” she screamed as she mounted me. Her entire body shook so violently, I was worried she’d take her monster form again. When that didn’t happen, I picked her up and

slammed her onto her back, held her butt off the bed by grabbing her legs around the knees, and pounded her harder than I'd ever done before. She wailed, beat the bed with her fists, and tossed her head around. I totally thought she was going to lose control, but she didn't. And for much of the rest of the night, I tossed her around her bed like a little ragdoll.

When I collapsed on top of her, almost too weak to get myself off, she clawed my back and bit my neck and shoulders. It hurt somewhat, but it also drove me out of my mind with passion. I came harder than I ever have and blacked out. Or redded out. Instead of everything going black, it all went red, until redness washed away everything in my vision.

I awoke a few minutes later, when Ninkasi dropped me into her pool and held my face under its fountain.

I sputtered and coughed, and she relaxed and hopped into the pool with me.

"I love you so much!" She cried. "Oh, Gaian, I LOVE YOU SO MUCH!" She broke down in tears. Big, raging, sobbing tears. Her lips quivered.

I raised a hand to stroke her head and pull her down to rest in my arms. Only I was too weak to move very much. I wasn't breathing regularly, and took down gulps of air at random. My heart alternated between rapid fluttering and strong, intermittent pounding. I knew this feeling: I was having a stroke. I couldn't believe it! It had to be the result of some residual muscle memory left over from my old, dead-and-gone body.

"I'm fine!" I shouted angrily, and everything returned to "normal." Breathing became easy all of a sudden, and I relaxed. Still, I couldn't help but notice a burning, stinging sensation across my back and in certain parts of my neck and shoulders.

"Babe," I said, "I need some of the finest liquor available."

"Clouds!" Ninkasi shouted, "Bring us a bottle of the finest Cognac in Marduk's cellar!"

A bottle soared into the suite and landed squarely in the middle of the massive, round bed. The Goddess of Brewing sprang to her feet, hopped onto her bed and grabbed the bottle, then hopped back into the pool with me.

"Wow!" she exclaimed as she read the label. "This stuff is around 2000 years old!" She uncorked the bottle and handed it to me. I put the open end of its neck to my lips, upturned it, and gulped down about a fifth of its contents.

"Hot Damn!" I gasped after releasing the bottle from my lip-lock. "Marduk has excellent taste in Cognac!"

Ninkasi grabbed the bottle from my hand and downed a rather largish gulp herself. She choked on it. When her coughing subsided, she told me "He's really into fine liquor, but most of his cellar is taken up with Cognac. It's his favorite."

"It's about the only thing I like more than Brandy, and I've had very little excellent Brandy, begging your pardon."

"Not to worry, my love," she said. "I'm mostly into beer and ales, myself." We laughed a little about that.

I stood up, scooped her up and returned us to her bed. We settled into the center and pulled a comforter over us, as we nestled into one another's arms. The burning, stinging sensation in my back was still a little uncomfortable, so I took another swig.

"Oh, Gaian!" she cooed to me. "I've never experienced anything like that before." She began to cry again.

"Sweetheart..?" I tried to ask, but couldn't think of the right question.

"Darling," she explained to me without looking my way. Her eyes were affixed to the ceiling, which – in addition

to displaying a dazzling view of the Milky Way – was streaked by an almost constant parade of meteors. Some glowed green, some blue, some white. A rather huge, blue one slowly passed almost directly overhead and made a loud, fiery noise as it passed, then exploded as it neared the western horizon. The concussion from the distant explosion shook the Palace walls.

"Whoa!" Ninkasi gasped. "Tonight is so magical, in so many ways."

She began to cry again. "Please never do anything like that again, my sweet, sweet, sexy lover!" she said, and sobbed aloud.

I totally didn't get what she was talking about. She'd clearly enjoyed the experience, and I was rather proud of my performance.

"Oh, my darling!" she wailed. "You expended so much energy tonight, it cut your new lifespan short!" she coughed and wailed some more.

"Maybe by as much as half-a-million years." She broke down in tears for real then, and rolled over on top of me. "Please, don't…" she cried, "Please, don't…you weren't young when you arrived! I have no idea how much time we'll have together, but even eternity isn't enough! Please don't do anything like that again…" She cried some more.

"My love," I explained to her, puzzled that I even had to, "I'm First Wizard of the Everywhen. We'll have eternities of eternities together!"

She sat up and looked back down at me. She had a blank look on her face. And not a clue.

"Wanna do it some more?" I offered.

She sniffled. "Really…?" she asked. She still had that blank look on her face, like she didn't know what was happening. So, I sat up, grabbed her by the shoulders and pounced on her.

I'm not even going to pretend I remember very much of what happened the rest of the night. I crushed her. She jumped on me. She got LOUD! She's never done that before. My back still aches when I think back upon that night. She absolutely shredded my back.

When she got a look at it in the morning light, she screamed and covered her mouth!

"Don't move!" she said.

She called aloud: "Clouds, please bring Chloe over, with all her healing supplies!"

Chloe – clad in a makeshift Nurse's outfit - exited a bank of clouds and looked around, eyes wide in astonishment. "Heavens!" she exclaimed. "Nice place!"

My beloved said not a word. We were both still naked at that point, and Ninkasi hurriedly pulled a corner of the comforter over my lap. Then, she had a quick look at her hands and let out a little screech. She hopped off the bed and over into the pool and began to scrub her nails. I could see the dried, sticky blood running off her fingers from where I sat.

Chloe was watching her mistress with serious concern etched on her face. She casually looked my way, dropped

her supplies, and covered her open mouth with her hands, eyes wide in horror of what she saw.She was weeping then, but dutifully picked up her supplies and began to unpack them.

"My Lord Gaian," she whimpered, "Did some Babylonian beast attack you?"

Ninkasi and I simultaneously replied, "Yeah, kinda…" and "NOOOO!"

Chloe picked up a spray bottle and began to pump out a thick mist over all the afflicted areas. The moisture felt icy cold, and soothing. I didn't realize how tense I was at that point, not until I relaxed. My back felt so much better, I flopped onto my belly and made myself comfortable.

Chloe put the spray bottle away and took up a tube. "My Lady, I'll need some assistance here," she requested.

Ninkasi rose from the pool and crawled over her bed until she was kneeling beside myself and Chloe.

"Now," Nurse Chloe instructed her, "As I squeeze this stuff out of the tube, use this brush to spread it across the bloody areas."

My Love did as instructed. After a few minutes, she let out a little whimper and stopped.

Nurse Chloe told me "Hold still, m'lord – this might hurt a little…" and I heard some scissors snip something. I felt something tug at me, but whatever Chloe sprayed on me effectively numbed my back, all over.

"***Chloe!***" Ninkasi angrily snapped at her servant.

"Well, I didn't know what else to do with it!" Nurse Chloe said, as she smacked her lips.

"He's tasty!" she added.

"Chloe!" the Goddess of Brewing and Violently Hyper-Sexual Lover repeated.

"Good thing you don't have sharp teeth!" Chloe appraised, as she pushed more of the tube's contents out onto a few places along my neck and shoulders. "These are mostly bruises…

"You can go ahead and massage the paste into his skin," she further instructed her mistress. Now, THAT felt good! I murmured a bit and began to drift off to sleep.

"Don't get too comfortable, My Lord," She told me. "I need you to sit up." I did as she said.

“Now, hold this in place, m’lady!” Ninkasi reached over to hold something against my back. Chloe then proceeded to wrap some thin linen around my back and chest. “Wow!” she exclaimed. “I didn’t even notice how much bigger you are!” she peeked over my shoulder.

“Goodness!” she yelped, and let out, under her breathe, “Lucky girl…”

Ninkasi gave her servant a nudge with an elbow. “Focus!” she asserted.

They continued to work in silence.

After a while, Chloe tied the linen into a knot. “It would be best to change this dressing before nightfall,” she

advised. “And he needs to sleep on his stomach for a few nights, with his back uncovered, to allow skin to regrow. To be totally honest, it would be best if his back could be left uncovered until the skin was well on its way to recovery – about a week should do it.”

“A week?“ Ninkasi protested.

“I’ll be right back,” I told them, then added, much louder, “Clouds! Take me to my bedroom - in my Sacred Hall!”

I immediately reappeared from some clouds opposite of the ones that transported me away. I was completely dressed, in one of the finest outfits Ninkasi’s tailors made for the new me, my skin considerably darker than it was when I left, and wearing a Gizmo on the opposite arm than the one I’d been traveling with.

“All better!” I proclaimed.

I’d spent a month with Eris, mostly at my place. Have I mentioned that I felt I’d short-changed my other wife, as far as love-making goes? A month with seven-feet tall me did wonders to ensure Eris didn’t feel neglected. I sat on the bed and pulled off my boots. Not content with that, I continued to undress.

Ninkasi immediately looked relieved. And fairly aroused, too.

“Holy fuck, he’s hot!” Chloe proclaimed.

“Thank you, Chloe,” Ninkasi spat at her chief-of-staff. “You are dismissed.”

Chloe packed up her things and made her way into a cloud. “Too-da-loo!” she sang as she disappeared.

I See You

After undressing and crawling into the bed, I took Ninkasi into my arms and hugged her tightly. “Lover…” I began.

She cut me off. “Let’s just lay here in peace for a few seconds!” she requested.

I pulled her over to my side. I really like to cuddle with Goddesses. Nothin’ like it.

As I was in danger of drifting off to sleep, Savannah the Reaper and Autonomia sprinted into Ninkasi’s suites.

“Hey, girls!” I greeted them, while I tossed a comforter over my wife-to-be and myself.

“Hey, Gaian! Good morning, Ninkasi!” Savannah said, through a tremendous yawn and stretch. Autonomia fell out the second she settled onto the mattress.

“What did ya’ll do all night?” I asked, innocently enough.

“We watched Nanaya almost fuck Nabu to death!” she informed me. “Nanaya’s relentless!”

“Ninkasi nearly did me in last night, too!” I illuminated the little Reaper.

“I did NOT!” my love protested, and swatted me on the shoulder.

I gasped and fell onto my stomach.

“Oh, my Lord!” Ninkasi was taken aback.

I rolled over, onto my back. “All better!” I reminded her. “Remember when I said that? Like three minutes ago?”

She gave me a very blank, very displeased look.

“No matter,” I assured her, “but, I do have to mention - I do ***not*** like the idea of the servants snacking on me.”

Ninkasi was upset. “She ***didn’t***…” My wife suddenly put her hands over her mouth. “Heavens Above! She **totally** did!”

Savanah the Reaper was now fast asleep, too. I pulled the girls closer, snuggled up closer to Ninkasi, and relaxed.

(*Does one have any idea of where I felt like I was? Truly? Uh-huh – that’s right!*)

I awoke before midday. I was famished and didn't want to wake my sleeping loves, so I carefully crawled away, got dressed, and made my way back to the banquet hall, wearing both Gizmos for the first time in…a while?

There was an ongoing feast in honor of my visit, you know. And I'd been away for at least a month.

Once there, I stood at the doorway, completely transfixed by the sight I beheld there. Many tables and chairs were overturned. Food, plates, goblets, flagons, shoes - all varieties of clothing - lay scattered everywhere. And naked bodies.

Servants attempted to put the guests into upright positions, and gave them water to help clear their heads. They'd have the guests take a look around and point out things, which the servants would then go retrieve, so as to allow the guests to begin the process of recovering their dignity by getting dressed.

The celebrants' heads were a-swirl. As I'd thought, few of them had many clear memories of their drunken debauchery overnight. (*Have I mentioned this was all happening in Babylon? **THE** Babylon*.)

The servants were obviously overjoyed to have someone up and about to fuss over, and several of them ushered me back to my table, set an undamaged, clean chair up for me to sit upon, while others suggested to me all varieties of food and beverages. I'd nod and point to one who made a suggestion to my liking, and he/she'd disappear to fetch it. Half the table's surface was shortly completely covered with plates overflowing with yummy foods. And I was stuffing myself like a glutton. And guzzling wine like I was afraid I'd never have any, ever again. In between pitchers full of water, which I attempted to gulp down as I unconcernedly upended them over my face.

I'm a jolly drunk, and stuffing my gut is something I've always delighted in. In about twenty minutes, I was a very happy ex-camper indeed.

I was so engrossed in my gluttony, I almost didn't notice Marduk stroll into the hall, carrying his wife over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

He plopped down on his throne and set his wife on his lap. She swayed so that she might have fallen off and onto the floor, had he not anticipated her grogginess and pulled her back upright.

"Will you sit still?" he chided her.

"I don't know, will I?" she replied while looking at a tapestry on the nearest wall. Marduk held her in place by gripping his Queen firmly around the waist.

When servants began to surround the Royal Couple, Marduk pointed over to my table. "I'll have the same!" he instructed.

Seeing no reason to stick to décor at this point, I scooted on over, so as to be seated directly next to the King. The servants made sure all my food accompanied me.

"Ninkasi had quite a lot of her special brew yesterday afternoon, otherwise, I would have enjoyed…" I began a long-winded apology for running out on a feast held in my honor.

“Tis nothing,” the God/Emperor shook his head. “The behavior here last night was nothing short of atrocious.”

(*Babylon. Did I mention we were in Babylon?*)

“At least you had the good sense to seek out some privacy.”

Sarpanit sniffled a little. “Oh, darling, you didn’t enjoy last night at all?”

“My love,” he explained to her, as her face dangled above the tabletop. “If you’ll recall, I very much enjoyed it. All. Night. Long.” He gave her an affectionate squeeze, which brought her upright against his mighty chest, where she nuzzled in and began to purr. She looked right proud of herself, and it was very clear to see she loved her Lord very much, she was so happy in that moment. (*I was so happy for them*.)

Marduk began to experimentally use both arms and hands to emulate my gluttonous approach to our brunch. Sarpanit’s face began to slide off his chest. The Mighty King rolled his eyes and shook his head, then used both arms to reposition her, and tucked her shoulder beneath his armpit. He made a second attempt at full-on gluttony and was pleased with the results. He was clearly as famished as I would have been, if I had spent **one** night of gleeful, sexy rampage with a spouse. I’d been with Ninkasi the night before, and with Eris for a month prior to that, though, and didn’t feel like I’d gotten nearly enough to eat for at least a week, so I was damn near starved. The mighty Marduk’s appetite was no match for that of seven feet tall me.

“Have you ever spent the night in Ninkasi’s suite?” I asked my host when I decided my mouth could go a few seconds without having even more food shoveled into it. And – though I made a heroic effort to eat everything put before me – the servants kept heaping up freshly-cooked, steamy plates full of delicious-smelling food in front of me.

“Oh, my dear Ninkasi!” Sarpanit suddenly piped up and sat upright to stare off across the Hall.

Her husband cut her off. “Ninkasi’s not present at the moment, my love,” he patiently explained to her.

“Oh?” she inquired as she began to survey the Hall for a sign of my Goddess wife. Ninkasi obediently took that moment to make her entrance. She walked over to join us, and helped herself to the food and wine before me. After a few swallows, she took a que from Sarpanit and had a seat on my lap.

“Ah!” the Queen chirped when she began to be able to focus her eyes and attention where she desired. “There you are!”

“Good morning,” my beloved chirped in reply.

“Dearest Ninkasi, last night’s brew was absolutely my favorite of all!” Sarpanit smiled and sighed. “Please make a few kegs for me!”

“I can do better than that,” Ninkasi bragged. “I’ll just go ahead and leave the remaining five kegs for your cellars.”

“Oh, you **dear**!” Sarpanit was so happy, she was on the verge of tears.

“I’ve had Chloe and Tim bring along some other left-over kegs from past festivals.” Marduk shot her a wary look.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Ninkasi assured us, as she tore a chunk off a roasted beast’s breast with her teeth. “All these kegs do is lower inhibitions, so everyone can dance and be merry…” she gulped down a decent quaff form a half-gallon flagon of one of her “100-percent K.O. Reserve” beers.

It was clear she had something to add, and she looked a little concerned about continuing to describe the replacement brew’s effects. “Well…when it lowers one’s inhibitions, the first thing it does is make one rather lippy. There might be the occasional fistfight, but,” she added quickly, “the end result is usually a jovial make-up toast, and the ones fighting become lifelong drinking buddies and fast friends.”

Marduk and I looked at her with somewhat flummoxed expressions. “Well, the Revitalizing Brew was based on that recipe, and the one for the first night of the Hootenanny was based on it as well...

“And I made today’s batch in order to dampen the unnecessary side effects. It’s just meant to get people happy and dancing.” She apologized. “I did the same for subsequent upgrades and variants.

“Seriously, what happened between the two of you was both unexpected and…well…almost miraculous,” she concluded.

Sarpanit – who had gone back to nuzzling and purring – suddenly perked up. “You can say that again,” she cooed as she reached up and stroked her husband’s face.

Ninkasi and I laughed quietly at that, while Marduk grinned and leaned over to kiss his wife on the forehead. He sighed contentedly, then shook his head a bit vigorously to wake himself up, somewhat.

“I think we could use some of the Revitalizing Brew while we meet in the Council Room this afternoon,” he told

his sister. “Gaian has been speaking of great doings he has in mind, and he needs to explain himself. Especially to you.”

“Thanks a lot, buddy!” I thought. “Just throw me under the bus, why don’t you?”

“Keep yourselves at the ready,” he cautioned us. “I have to prepare these fools for the formal reception tonight.”

Tim entered the hall, followed by several servants, who rolled two kegs through the door. Ninkasi saw him, inserted a couple of fingers into her mouth, and whistled. When Tim caught sight of her, she raised a hand in the air, pointed a finger upwards, and moved her upper arm in a few circles. Tim nodded and began to tap the kegs: Revitalizing Brew for everyone!

Marduk ate some more from a roasted, juicy leg of mutton.

Just then, Nanshe entered the hall with my little girls in tow. They ran over to where Ninkasi and I were seated. “Freakin’ Fireballs!” the Reaper announced, “Ninkasi – you’re so beautiful!”

“Wow!” my other daughter added. “And way hot, too!”

Ninkasi giggled a little. “Thanks, guys!” she said before she forked a huge portion of omelet into her mouth. The kids hurried over and began to stuff their faces, too.

Marduk was staring at Nanshe, Sarpanit looked in the direction he did and her countenance changed immediately. She rose to her feet.

“I can see you, Nanshe!” she said to her much-beloved, former servant.

Marduk took to his feet to stand between Nanshe and his Queen. “I see you as well!” he said, accusingly.

Confused and concerned, I gave Nanshe a closer look. Sure enough, she was a few inches taller, and quite a lot lovelier, with rippling muscles.

Marduk snapped his fingers and pointed to Nanshe. Guards immediately began to encircle her, weapons at the ready.

“My Lord!” I protested. “Has Lady Savannah’s servant somehow offended you?” I tried to diffuse the situation.

Sarpanit answered, “When I acquired her, there was no mention of her being a demi-Goddess. It’s rare to find such Beings on offer. Her price would have been tremendously greater than what I paid.”

“Thinking back on things since her arrival, it seems obvious,” Marduk added. “She’s one of the sharpest, most capable women I’ve ever met – Human or not!”

Nabu was suddenly in on the discussion. “If she were in the Royal Guard, she’d be an officer. She understands weapons and tactics readily and thoroughly. She’s absolutely lethal!” he accused her.

Nanshe slowly sank to the ground and set her hands on the floor. Tears were beginning to drip down her face. She was clearly in shock.

“If it please my Lord, allow me to speak to her while you prepare for this evening’s reception,” I almost begged.

“We can keep her confined in Ninkasi’s servant’s quarters.”

Nabu was quick to respond. “Actually, that’s not a bad idea,” he assessed the suggestion. “Her suites are in the second-tallest tower in the palace, and there’s only one window in the servant’s quarters.”

Marduk nodded his consent. “Nanshe, you have some explaining to do,” he told her. Nabu motioned for a couple of Guards to take her arms. They raised her to her feet, and Nanshe was hauled away, completely surrounded by a dozen or so Royal Guards, weapons drawn and at the ready.

“Perhaps she’s just a genetic anomaly, much as I am!” I offered.

Ninkasi added, “She may not have known, herself!”

We all love Nanshe. It was difficult for me to believe how she could be seen as a threat. She did, however, have 24/7 access to the Emperor and Empress. The potential for the assassination of one or both of them could not be denied.

I hoped she would satisfactorily answer all my concerns, and we could think of an alternative to torturing her to death, or otherwise executing Savannah’s beloved servant. The attempt on Savannah’s life did nothing to defuse the situation.

Marduk’s servants were busy, uprighting tables and either setting chairs by their sides or hauling broken (or soiled) ones away, and returning with replacements. Celebrants busied themselves by getting dressed and searching for lost shoes, boots, slippers, hats, scarves, dresses, trousers, etc. Few people noticed Nanshe’s arrest.

I lay my head to rest on Ninkasi’s back. “Darling, how am I going to tell Savannah about this?” I pondered out loud. “She’ll be absolutely devastated.”

“Do you think she’ll try to do something stupid?” my wife asked, as she gnawed a sizable portion of a large bird’s roasted leg off its bone.

“Possibly,” I mused. “The stupidest thing I think she’d do is just deny it, and act like nothing’s wrong.” Tears were beginning to drip from my eyes onto Ninkasi’s back. “Her entire view of reality could crash around her.”

“You think she’ll go nuts, like Inanna?” Ninkasi didn’t slow down, and finished off a pint of the Revitalizing Brew.

Her servants were helping Marduk’s servants browbeat the sluggish celebrants into drinking the beer. I saw more than one person ask for water. The servants promptly made a show of pouring water into a glass, but on the way into the guest’s hands, someone or other would substitute a glass of beer for the one with water. Once the celebrants began to feel the brew’s effect, they’d greedily gulp it down.

I wailed, “Please…she’s so young! With all her Immortal life ahead of her!”

“Love is a mighty force,” Ninkasi said as she motioned for another couple of beers for our shared seat. “It can do a lot of damage.”

She certainly was being casual about this. I suppose Inanna’s flip-out was one for the ages. And it just went on, and on, and on…

No one seems to know - or care, really - what happened to Inanna. One day, folks realized she wasn’t around

anymore. They were actually kind of glad. Well, I dunno…maybe I should say they were **relieved**. She did some batshit crazy shit. But, those are stories for another time. (*So many stories…*)

When she first found out about her beloved’s murder at the hands of Marduk, Inanna went on a slaughtering rampage that would make Dysnomia blush in shame. The dead bodies piled around her like mountains. She clothed herself in their severed limbs. She drank their blood for

sustenance. She wore their severed heads as a necklace. And she didn't stop killing until Ninkasi tossed Dummuzi's body down in front of her. When she realized she was standing on his corpse, she broke down in tears. She was inconsolable for a long, long while.

And I'm going to need her co-operation to make Dummuzi whole again.

I extracted myself from beneath my wife. "I'm going to take a bath and wait for Savannah to wake up," I excused myself. I asked Tim to bring a goodly portion of fresh food to Ninkasi's rooms. I also asked him to bring along a huge flagon of the Revitalizing Brew.

Once again, I luxuriated in the bath, then redressed myself in the fine apparel I'd been wearing earlier, climbed to the middle of the bed and began to wait for Savannah, and to formulate some sort of something – anything! – to say to Nanshe.

Savannah Dawn woke me up around an hour after my bath. "Hey, there!" she chirped. "Have you seen Nanshe anywhere?"

"Sit down, sweetie!" I patted the bed beside where I lay. She sat down - a puzzled, concerned look on her face.

I sat upright. This was going to be difficult. Maybe not even possible.

"Savannah, something's come up, and right now the only one who knows what it's about is Nanshe," I told her. I was tearing up.

"My Lord…" Savannah tried to ask. Her eyes started to water up.

"I'm about to go speak to her, and see if I can find out what the matter is." I was speaking slowly and deliberately. Before she could ask, I told her; "It's better for her not to see you right now. But, more than anything else, it's important for you to stay out of the way and let things happen, let her story unfold, and just…" I had to break eye contact, or I'd be crying uncontrollably soon.

"What's happening?" Savannah demanded.

"I told you – only Nanshe knows what this is all about. And if she's not careful, if she's not truthful, if she tries to protect anyone…honey…right now, the only likely scenario is that Nanshe will lose her life." I swallowed hard, tried to dry my tears and failed.

"Oh, FUCK!" I wailed, "I don't want us to lose her! She's wonderful! She's amazing!"

I sniffled. "And you need to keep out of the way! **Do you understand?**" I was suddenly shouting.

"**Keep out of the way while Nanshe loses her life?**" My beloved concubine shouted back. "You're not making any kind of sense! You know better than anyone we can't be stopped from doing anything we want. And you can't stop me from going to her!"

"**Just stop it, you selfish, little girl!**" I out-shouted her. I loomed above her as we faced one another on our knees. She was still only about five feet, nine inches tall, compared to my seven feet.

“Whatever happens has to happen! If we intervene, it’ll be war between Marduk’s House and **ours**! Is THAT what you want?”

“We could…” she started to say.

“**Do you know what happened in their last war?**” I was screaming at my astral body’s fullest capacity. “No – no one does! So many dead that no one remembers they ever lived! Entire regions of the earth that were once verdant forests and grasslands were reduced to barren rock and sand.”

Savannah was looking glassy-eyed now. I wasn’t sure she was listening to me.

“Here and now!” I pointed to the floor beneath me. “This is the best and maybe only chance I’ll ever have to set things right! Wrongs that have been festering for who knows how long! The alien invasions of Earth! The Human race’s enslavement by the alien forces! I can make it all right! I can undo the damage! I work miracles, babe!” I implored her to understand.

I expended the last of my energy by shouting “**Believe in me!**”

“**And all I have to do is let Nanshe be killed?**” Savannah shouted back.

“I’ve told you, only Nanshe knows what this is all about.” I rolled over to the edge of the bed and somersaulted off it, landed on my feet, and raised up as fast as I could manage. I wanted to keep Savannah in my sight.

“Don’t cross me on this, my love – I beg you!” I pleaded. “Because if you try to go behind my back and do something stupid, the next time we meet, we’ll meet as enemies, and I will strike you down!”

She looked hurt now. At least I knew I had her attention. I raised an arm, strapped one of the Gizmos to it, and held the Bolt-thrower aloft. They began to rev up. “I’m going to Nanshe now, to see what she has to say. Wait for me here! Don’t try to intervene. You’ll fail.”

I turned and left. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Once in the hallway, I collapsed against the wall to cry a little and catch my breath.

I made my way to the servant’s rooms in a daze. Upon seeing the door, I stopped and tried to pull myself together. After a few deep breaths, I continued. Two guards on either side of the doorway snapped to attention.

“I’ve come to question the prisoner,” I told them. They turned to face one another, while one rapped on the door. It opened and I walked in.

Nanshe saw me, stood, and turned away.

“Oh, my Lord…” she whimpered. The guards in the room snapped to attention. That was all the opportunity she needed. Nanshe dived out the window, from around eight feet away. The chains which had shackled her limbs, waist, and neck clattered to the floor, and the guard who stood full in the middle of the window grabbed after her, but only managed to pull her skirt off. I marched over to the window. It looked over the partition in the city. The Euphrates flowed below. There was no trace of her; no splash, and she wasn’t visible swimming away. It’s like she disappeared into the aether when she flew out the window.

Without looking at them, I began to cross the room, towards the door, and ordered the guards: “Tell Marduk she escaped, and that she just ***flew away***, right before our eyes. Tell him she transformed into a bird! Tell him anything you can imagine! Tell him everything you imagine.” I turned, shaking my head slowly. I looked to the captain of the Guard.

“Tell him I’ve gone to find her and eliminate this threat to him and his household.” I clenched my jaw until I thought I’d grind my teeth into paste.

“Clouds!” I spit out, “Take me to Mysti’s stall!” I crossed the floor towards the door, into the clouds, and disappeared.

The guards stood transfixed for a few seconds, before forming themselves into ranks and marching off to the Banquet Hall. Their commander shook his head. He was clearly spooked. “The Gods…I revere them, I serve them…but they are terrifying!”

There was a murmuring of consent.

Nanshe’s Ordeal

“Nanshe,” I cried out as Mysti rushed out of the clouds to where Dawn’s servant stood. She was beside a huge, gnarly tree, upon a large rock. There was a rope tied to the tree’s trunk. The end not tied there was strung across one of the tree’s lower branches and tied into a noose. Nanshe was in the process of pulling the noose around her head.

“What are you doing?” I scolded her. “**Stop it**, immediately!”

She didn’t acknowledge my words and pulled the noose around her neck. I pulled a dagger from its scabbard in Mysti’s saddle, and flung it at the tree. It was a good toss, and cut through the rope. Nanshe wasn’t paying attention, so she tugged at the noose and hopped down from the boulder. The dagger had not severed the rope, but Nanshe’s weight was too much for it to bear. It snapped, and she hit the ground with a thud.

Mysti came to a halt in front of the rock, and I jumped from her saddle, onto the rock, and leapt to the ground, almost on top of Savannah’s beloved servant. She was crying. Her chest heaved as she sobbed and wailed.

“Please!” she begged me. “Please let me do this!” she gasped. Instead of letting her have her way, I grabbed the noose and jerked it open, then snatched it out of her hands and over her head.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I screamed at her.

“You don’t…don’t…under…stand…” she tried to say as her chest continued to heave with loud, anguished sobs.

“I don’t **need** to understand!” I was really pissed off. I continued to scream at her. “You are well-loved, smart, capable, beautiful, and a demi-Goddess to boot – your life matters!” ***I*** was in tears now. Her agony was somehow contagious. I was kneeling in front of her, as she tried to crawl away. I grabbed her by an arm, swung her over to my chest and wrapped my arms around her. She tried to squirm free of my grasp, but what can I say? Seven feet tall me is freakin’ strong, even with my slender build. She certainly wasn’t going to escape my grip.

She wailed and sobbed so violently, I was worried she’d have a stroke. “I need you to calm down and explain to me why someone with such an amazing future ahead of her would want to throw it all away.”

“They have my family!” she screamed, then fell into another fit of sobbing.

Understanding flooded my entire being: She was being blackmailed and coerced into doing something – likely something very vile – by some assholes who held her family hostage. Or who **once** held her family hostage. There was no doubt in my mind that the scumbags had already killed her family. There was just no way anyone would want to be tracked down for their part in a scheme to harm Marduk’s House. Her family was dead and likely chopped to bits and dumped into the Persian Gulf.

“Please…” she wailed again.

“I take it back – you’re a stupid, stupid child!” I yelled at her: **“Do you know who you are speaking to?”**

“My Lord, I beg you…”

“Nanshe!” I shouted, and held her away, at arm’s length. “There’s no wrong I can’t make right! There are no horrors I can’t undo. **Believe in me!**” (*To be totally honest, I had no idea how I could make these words valid. I did know, however, they were true.*) I shook her to get her attention. Young, adult Autonomia was suddenly standing behind her. She snatched one of Nanshe’s arms and held it behind the sobbing demi-Goddess’ back. Autonomia gently but firmly removed a knife from Nanshe’s hand.

I raised my eyes to my daughter’s to thank her. I was not paying nearly enough attention to what Nanshe was doing, other than crying.

“And that was supremely stupid,” I told her.

“Please,” Nanshe continued to plead, “Let me die! I don’t deserve to live.” Autonomia made herself busy by taking my dagger from the tree’s trunk, cutting the rope into a usable length, then tying Nanshe’s arms to her sides, and her hands together.

“Thanks, darlin’,” I said to Autonomia, and released Nanshe, who plopped over on her side and continued to cry.

She started sputtering some words. Like, “You’ve all been so good to me,” and “I love you all so much,” and “I don’t deserve to live.”

“Can you think of a way to get her to shut up and listen to us?” I asked my daughter.

She thought for a few seconds, while Nanshe continued to blubber random thoughts at us. “Yeah, I’ll be right back!” She said before she disappeared.

And reappeared almost instantly. She carried a girl in her arms. The child was looking around in wonder.

“Am I dreaming?” she asked my Goddess daughter.

“It’s okay for you to believe that,” Autonomia told her. Then she nodded her chin toward Nanshe, who had not noticed their presence as of yet. Nanshe likely couldn’t see through her tears. At least she was crying quietly now.

“Do you know that woman?” Autonomia asked the girl. The child looked at Nanshe, but didn’t make a reply right away.

“That’s your cousin, Nanshe!” The child looked confused. “That’s how she’ll look when she’s all grown up!” Autonomia explained.

“Why is she crying?” the girl asked. “And why is she tied up?”

“She’s really, really sad, and she was trying to harm herself, so we had to tie her up!” Autonomia told her. “If you want, you can go over and untie her.”

Autonomia set the child down, who warily approached Nanshe to kneel beside her.

“Nanshe, what’s wrong?” She asked. “Please don’t cry.” She began to untie her cousin’s hands.

“What are you doing to me?” Nanshe demanded of the darkness all around them. But, she appeared to be alone, with the exception of her cousin. Autonomia, Mysti, and I were hiding. Nanshe looked around and couldn’t find us.

Her cousin took the rope from around her, and gave Nanshe a hug. “Does that help? Are you feeling better?”

Nanshe was not believing what she was experiencing. But, she wasn’t crying anymore.

“Here,” her cousin offered her a kerchief. “Dry your tears and wipe your face.”

“Nenetl,” Nanshe said as she took the kerchief and began to clean herself up, “How can you be here? I saw you…”

Autonomia suddenly jumped over to them. She cut off Nanshe’s words.

“That was just a dream, Nanshe,” she gently explained, as she placed a reassuring hand to Nanshe’s shoulder.

“A horrible, horrible dream.” She reached over and stroked Nanshe’s hair. “Now, don’t you want to return to your family? They’ll wonder where you went, why you aren’t with them. Go back, Nanshe. Don’t make them worry about you.”

“But…how?” Nanshe’s tears began to flow again, but she was much more calm this time around.

“You’re both dreaming,” Autonomia told them. “So, just lay your heads down and sleep, and when you wake up, you’ll be back where you belong – surrounded by people who love you!” Autonomia was crying softly now.

“Sleep now,” she concluded, and stroked both of the girl’s heads. They immediately fell into deep sleep.

“I’ll take care of these two, Pops,” my amazing daughter called over to my hiding place. She dried her face.

“You go take care of the bastards who butchered Nanshe’s People.”

“I love you so much, darlin’,” I said. “Would you like for me to dedicate their deaths to you?”

“I’m pretty happy with who I am, Pops, but thanks.” She thought for a second. “You might could set them against the ones those bastards are allied with, as curses!”

“What an interesting idea!” I said, admiringly.

“Mysti,” I called to my horse.

Autonomia promptly disappeared, along with the two girls at her feet.

Once back to where she’d found Nenetl, Autonomia set Nanshe down, then carried her cousin back to where she’d been sleeping when my daughter found her. Time was frozen.

Autonomia returned to where Nanshe slept. Savannah appeared beside her. “Can I tell her goodbye?” she asked.

“I think it would just confuse her,” Autonomia replied. “Hide, while I wake her up!”

Savannah made herself scarce. By that I mean she limited her presence to the point where she could not interact with the others, but could observe them.

“Nanshe,” Autonomia cooed, as she again stroked the sleeping demi-Goddess’ hair. “Get up! It’s time for you to return to your real life.” Nanshe began to rouse herself and stand.

“You may be haunted by horrible dreams - for your entire life, perhaps. But know this,” Autonomia stood tall before Savannah’s former servant. “There are powerful Beings who love you, and they will not let anything horrible happen to you or your family. If you *ever* fear for your or their safety, call upon my father. His name is Gaian, and he loves you. He believes in

you. Call out loud to him if you or your People are in danger, and the danger will pass. Believe in him, Nanshe: You are destined to be his High Priestess."

Nanshe looked confused, and maybe a little frightened.

"It's okay if you don't remember any of this. I don't know if that's possible, though. Many Others have so much love for you, and they will never forget you. You and your People are precious to us, dear. You can always call to us in time of need." My daughter sniffled a little and wiped away her tears.

Autonomia held Nanshe close, then planted a long, passionate kiss on her lips. Nanshe surrendered to it out of habit.

"You and your People will prosper for ages to come, if you learn the ways of the marshlands," Autonomia advised her, as she spun Nanshe around and gave a little push to her back. "Remember my words! But have no worries, when you are prepared to understand them, you will remember."

Nanshe needed no more prodding. She recognized her People's camp, near a rock outcropping on a ridge over-looking the Persian Gulf. She began to walk away. As she approached her People, she began to glow. When the glow was enough to obscure her body, it flared brightly for a second, and shot like a laser beam into her sleeping self, some few years ago.

Her slumbering self turned, almost as if she felt the impact of her soul's return from what she later interpreted as an out-of-body experience. She didn't wake up, though. When she did, she was a little disoriented for a second, until her baby sister and some other babies toddled and crawled their way over to her. Nanshe flopped onto her back, while they all squealed and piled on top of her. She laughed, they giggled, and it was years before she remembered anything from her time as Marduk's and Sarpanit's and Savannah Dawn's beloved servant.

Because she didn't remember the advice Autonomia gave her, her People found themselves kind of stuck between a rock and a hard place. Only the hard place was the sea. They were a nomadic, pastoral People, not an oceanic People.

Her People didn't necessarily suffer, but they certainly didn't prosper, either.

When she grew to be a young adult woman, Nanshe and many others of her generation set off for a brief festival campout of their own making. It wasn't just for fun, though. The leadership of her People were stymied. Behind them, the rough hills and semi-arid grasslands where they had wandered for about as long as they had been a People were becoming crowded with other pastoral Peoples, and the grasslands were being over-grazed. If they stayed, there were sure to be disputes over still-fertile valleys and the scattered mountain forests.

They could take to the seas, but the Persian Gulf was already thick with pirates and entire fleets of naval, merchant, and fishing ships.

Nanshe wandered away from her friends and sat on a rock outcropping one evening – the same one where her People were camped when Autonomia returned her to them. The craggily rocks gave a great view of the Gulf to the south, the Plains and rocky hills to the north and east, and the Marshlands to the west.

As the sun began to set, she could not help but notice flocks of birds gathering and descending into the marshy islands. For as far as her eyes could see, thick clouds of millions of birds of every size and color one could imagine, and some colors she had never seen before, descended into the marshlands for the evening.

She began to look around to see if anyone had followed her, as the last rays of the sun were sweeping across the plains and mossy, grassy bogs to the north. She noticed for the first time vast herds of deer and antelope in the distance, and…numerous varieties of such. In the scraggly hills, numerous sheep and goats. She could see burrowing, semi-aquatic mammals all along the marshy shores. So many!

For curiosity's sake, she looked to the south. She saw even more flocks of birds, completely different from the ones around the marshlands. She could make out strange animal calls, then the last light of the evening revealed tremendous numbers of creatures along the shore of the distant Gulf.

She cried and laughed at the same time. "My People have been given a great gift, but we haven't realized it yet, because we've become stuck in our ways, and keep too much to ourselves," she thought out loud.

She fell on her back and watched the stars begin to sparkle overhead. She had never felt as peaceful and happy as she did at that moment. And, suddenly, a voice spoke to her. "Remember my words!" the voice told her.

She didn't remember the rest, because it somehow disturbed her – caused her to feel anxious, frightened. She watched the heavenly spectacle above, as night chased away the twilight. Until she fell asleep.

Her friends found her in the pre-dawn chill, covered her with blankets, and snuggled in around her.

When they awoke and began to make their way back to their camp, she told them she wanted everyone to come up to the top of the rocky ridge where she'd slept.

Her People loved to play music and dance, and this was the reason Nanshe and her co-conspirators gave everyone close to their ages for this gathering. For tonight, Nanshe suggested a drum circle and dancing to put the sun to bed and greet the moon.

Her friends know a good idea when they hear one, so they were all present before sunset.

Before their evening meal was served up from the cooking fires, Nanshe stood on a little, rocky crag, so everyone could see her.

“My friends!” she called aloud. “My family!” She waved her arms to make sure she had everyone’s attention.

“We, who are ready to begin our own families, and wonder how we will be able to raise them in our changing world - we have all come here to discuss this, to see if we can envision things in ways our elders cannot.” No one really wanted to have this discussion, yet it was being discussed often, everywhere her People gathered throughout the course of their days. And, honestly, Nanshe is well-loved. If she has something to say, everyone is sure to hear her out.

“But, just look all around us! We are surrounded by life! Teaming, swarming, flocks, and herds of life! Everywhere you look!” She threw her arms open wide. Her friends were a little slow on the uptake, but when they began to look around, the “Ohh!”s and “Amazing!”s poured from their mouths like a gulf-borne breeze.

“I was once given a message in a dream. I was told I would remember when the time was right,” she had to pause briefly to quietly sniffle and wipe her face and nose. “This is what I was told: ‘You and your people will prosper for ages to come, if you learn the ways of the marshlands.’”

As they ***all*** began to marvel at the sheer volume of life they witnessed, everywhere they looked, Nanshe hopped down from the craggily rock, trotted over to one of the huge bass drums in the circle, and began to beat a rapid dance rhythm. Her generation shouted in approval, and they embarked on an evening’s partying that changed her People’s destiny for thousands of years to come. As they danced their ways to their evening meals, they were now become “People of the Marshlands.”

In the food prepared around the cooking fires that afternoon, numerous mushrooms were added to the stews, salads, and diced fruit. Most of them were psychoactive. I guess the best way to summarize that event would be to note that almost every young woman there returned to their People’s camp pregnant. One *fuck* of a party!

You Won’t Do THAT Again!

Autonomia watched Nanshe walk off into her past. She made her way back to me while I went to Mysti to mount up.

“Darlin’,” I told her, “You are beyond fabulous!”

“It’s true, I am!” she confessed.

“Clouds!” I shouted into the air after I regained my seat. “Take me to wherever Dysnomia is!” I looked to the Goddess of the Everywhen. “Sure you don’t wanna come along?” I invited her.

“Nah, you two have fun!” she waved me off. “And I mean that – make sure you show my sister a good time!”

I totally thought she meant I should let Dysnomia do the bulk of the slaughtering.

“Love you, girl!” I shouted as the clouds transported me to a road which wound its way along a mountainside.

Dysnomia rode at the head of a column of soldiers and their supply wagons, etc.

“Hail, Dysnomia!” I shouted as Mysti and I approached her.

“Hail, Gaian!” she proclaimed, somewhat puzzled.

“How fare you, Darlin’?” I asked, as our horses nuzzled past one another. When we were close enough, I leaned over to give her a hug. Without a doubt, she’s the mightiest warrior woman the world’s ever seen. (*I said ‘**without a doubt**!’*) She damn near pulled me out of my saddle when she squeezed me in return.

“Oh, fairly well.” She looked me up and down. “Married life suits you, Lord Gaian!” she teased.

“I rode with this army to annihilate a mighty force from a neighboring Kingdom, but they quickly packed up and fled when they saw our numbers,” she reported. “I believe they prefer to attack villages, were there are no armies to fight against them. I would suppose most people would flee from them, if they saw them coming. So, even if we had faced them on the battlefield, I doubt they would have been much of a challenge. I doubt they’ve ever fought a true battle.

“**They** still,” she nodded towards the column behind her, “have to find and eliminate this foreign horde, but I’ve lost all enthusiasm for the pursuit.”

“How disappointing for you,” I sympathized. Then added, “Are you in the mood to do a **whole *lot*** of slaughtering?”

She looked intrigued. “How ***much*** slaughtering?” she asked.

“Everyone! I want these assholes wiped from the world so completely, no one will remember them in a decade!” I enticed her. “But, honestly, I don’t know their numbers.”

She looked to be thinking it over, so I added.

“It’ll just be you and me, against an entire city!” I proclaimed. “I’ll knock down the walls, you go and slaughter them all.”

She squirmed in her saddle. “You know how to sweet-talk a girl!” she said, well-impressed. “You’re making me horny!” she concluded.

“Well, then,” I said, all full of myself, “Come along, then! Let’s go shed some blood!”

“I’m your girl!” she promised.

We emerged from the clouds on top of a dune near the Persian Gulf, overlooking a city under construction – its walls and towers uncompleted. Tents of many, many sizes and colors were set up along the dunes by the shore.

“There are so many!” Dysnomia observed.

There were easily a million and a half people out there.

“Need help?” I offered.

She had hopped off her horse, and taken its saddle off, while she shot me one of those “Really?” type looks.

“Well, I **did** promise you you’d get to do all the slaughtering, didn’t I?” I mused.

She began to pull her clothes off. “Are you going to take responsibility for making me all hot and wet?” she demanded.

“*Oh…*” I thought.

“I suppose I’m the only other one present, so you’re stuck with me, now aren’t you?” I teased.

“I like you like this…all tall and slaughtery…I like it quite a lot.” She said, while she molested me with her eyes.

“Let’s enjoy this night to the utmost,” I suggested.

“This is gonna be all kinds of fun,” she said, as she nudged her horse along.

“I’ll give their walls and camps a couple of blasts, blow their unfinished palace and temples to bits, then let you handle the rest.”

“I love the way you think,” she said, and her eyes sparkled.

I didn’t reply, and waited until she was about a half-mile from the city-under-construction. I blew a tone on my conch shell and held the Gizmo on my right arm up, with the Bolt-thrower in its grasp.

“Let’s have five brief, but powerful blasts, Gizmo!” It revved up, and the base of the Bolt-thrower began to glow red. When it reached a certain brilliance, the energy fired along the onion-shaped strips of gold, which narrowed into a point. A plasma blob made a “thup!” sound as it sprang forth from the tip, then screamed off into the night - much like that meteor did this last night.

The first burst arched its way over to the unfinished tower. The blast caught it about halfway across its width and
about three-quarters of the way down from its highest point. Bits of the tower flew away, and rained down into the camps, which stretched out for miles away. The rest of it collapsed where it stood.

Quite a lot of the tower was turned to powder, which would have caused many, many people to choke to death, if the second shot had not passed through it.

The fine dust exploded. Such a blast! Easily took out thousands with that one. Plus, my target had been the massive walls that supported the main gates into the city. It also exploded and tossed about even more chunks of huge rocks to squash a hella lotta the tents.

The third blast hit the palace walls. It also caused huge chunks of granite and marble to fall over the camps and nearby dunes. Many of the round pieces of huge columns meant to support the entrance, atop the grand staircase, tumbled or rolled for a ways before their forward momentum was absorbed sufficiently that it could be snuffed out by tall, sandy dunes.

The forth blast hit the temple – the building closest to completion. The size of the stones tossed around and knocked over…I mean, you could feel the ground shake with some of their impacts!

The final shot I directed at the harbor. It landed in the middle of a wharf and sent flaming bits of peers and ships flying all around, setting more fires, everywhere. There were sooo many ships and boats in the harbor and beyond, out along the coast.

A great many of them sank that night, after their hulls cracked from the heat. The flames were so radiant as to illuminate the sky in shades of red, orange, and yellow, with blue flames flickering around water level. It was
beautifully horrifying.

I asked Mysti to run along the length of the unfinished walls. We were able to find Dysnomia’s trail, so we followed after her.

Blood and carnage. All around, was blood and carnage. So many people. Just so many dead. Every single person. Dead.

Dysnomia came riding towards us.

“Damn, there’s a lot of them!” she informed me.

“Around a million and a half?” I guesstimated.

“Easily twice that,” she explained, while I pulled the Rye I’d been saving for a special occasion out from its compartment in Mysti’s saddle.

I uncorked the bottle and handed it to her. She took a careful swig and gave a satisfied gasp. “Ah! That’s the good stuff!” she appraised it. And further informed me “There are so many people sleeping in the open. Easily as many as in the camps.”

She took a huge pull on the whiskey and handed it back to me. “Their army has retreated, and are regrouping in the low hills over there,” she pointed out.

“I’m going to circle around, to those higher hills toward the north-west, then come at them, from the flank of their reserves. Then, I’m just going to cut swaths of death all across the middle of their ranks, and circle around and around, mopping up the remnants.” I took another swig and passed her the bottle.

She handed me the bottle again, after she took a very generous pull from it.

“When it’s all over, and we return to the place I left Sasha’s saddle and my clothes, all the blood should resemble a flower – a red rose.”

“A true artist of slaughter!” I laughed at her, and toasted her with the bottle and a swig.

“When we get up there, I’m going to fuck you to within an inch of your life.” She threatened me.

“I ain’t scared!” I bragged. “Besides, I can always just go ahead and fuck you to actual death, then resurrect you.”

“I just want to come over there and fuck you half to death right now!” she stated. “But I can wait – and ***destroy*** your cock later!”

“I’d like to see you try!” I cautioned her. And tossed her the bottle.

“Oh, if you want to witness a truly gory, bloody spectacle, take a peek at the beach and nearby dunes!” she pointed out a place along the natural harbor’s beach. “Panicked people stampeded through the camps and the people sleeping under the stars. Then *those* campers began to fight them off, and they’re all massacring each other, while everything around them is burning to the ground.”

“That sounds amazingly, dreadfully apocalyptic!” I pondered aloud.

“Okay,” Dysnomia called, and tossed back the Rye. It was mostly gone, but I enjoyed it to the end! “I’m off!”

“I’ll be waiting with your clothes and saddle!” I called to her as she rode away.

“Let’s get away from here, before the stench becomes overwhelming!” I suggested to Mysti!

“It’s like we have one mind!” she thought, as she wheeled about and took off at a full gallop. Moments like that are what riders live for. Mysti’s great!

I fucking love to watch Dysnomia slaughtering. No one, absolutely *no one* has any chance for escape.

She just charges through the enemy’s ranks, and – like the wake from the bow of a huge ship – the dead pile up
before her, and beside her, and behind her. It’s like thick rows of dominoes that keep falling and falling, all around her.

It took her less than an hour and a half to kill something like 70,000 infantry and 30,000 cavalry soldiers. She set their supply wagons on fire. She massacred irregulars who rushed into battle. I mean – it's just one Goddess!

Well, I did soften their forces up a little.

Eventually, she came galloping up the hillock. "Hey! Gaian!" she shouted. I stood in front of a gnarly tree.

"Here I am!" I shouted in reply, and flung my arms open wide. She launched herself off her horse's back and landed right in my arms. I was ready for her, though.

After she tossed her sword into a sand drift nearby, we ripped my clothes off, together, and I was in! Dysnomia doesn't waste time!

Absolutely the most athletic, physical sex I've ever experienced. She tossed me around the rock, the sand, the dunes, like the proverbial ragdoll. Me! At 7 feet, and 300 pounds! One has no idea how ***honored*** I felt!

When dawn arrived, I was propped up against the rock where Dysnomia's saddle and clothing lay. She lay asleep
on my lap. She'd expended a great deal of energy in battle last night, and soon wore herself out with me. I'd split myself in two and found us a blanket to cover up with, without having to disturb her. Being able to be two people at once was simple, I was surprised to discover.

As I lay there, enjoying a rare moment of outdoor tranquility, I heard a horse approach. Again, I split myself in two, so as to retrieve Dysnomia's sword from where she deposited it last night.

Nabu rode past the rock. His horse gave a snort and stopped abruptly when he saw us.

"Gaian!" he marveled. "What and who are you doing here?"

"This is one of Eris's other daughters, Dysnomia – the Slaughterer." I introduced him to the lightly snoring Anarchist Warrior Goddess.

"I can't imagine you aren't able to see the carnage and destruction the two of us wrecked below, just a little way from the coast," I speculated.

"I've only just crested the hillock," he said, and took a telescope from one of his horse's saddlebags and scanned the area below us.

"Dead!" he declared. "Everyone I see is dead."

"Have a look at the plain to the north," I recommended.

He looked through the telescope, then lowered it. "Surely this isn't what I think it is!"

"She cut down the opposing forces in a pattern," I bragged on her. "And don't call me Shirley."

"A black rose!" he observed, completely ignoring my corny-ass joke, while he resumed looking through the telescope.

"It was **red** last night!" We laughed.

“She excels at the art of slaughtering!” I further vaunted her artistic merit.

“So, what are you doing here?” I asked, in no hurry to stand.

“If I read the signs correctly - today, there will be a tsunami and an ocean surge. I’ve never witnessed one, so I thought I’d come and have a look.”

Well, that got me off my ass. Plus, I needed to take a whizz. After I got myself nominally dressed and hopped down from the rock momentarily, I climbed back up, crouched down, and held an arm out to Nabu. He looked up at me, grabbed the proffered arm by the wrist, and I swung him up to land next to me. We had a very commanding view of the coastal plain up there.

He gave the ocean a thorough inspection with the telescope. “I believe I see it approaching.”

I sat with my legs dangling over the side of the rock which faced the coast. Nabu did likewise. He grew impatient, and gave the remains of the city below another examination. He whistled.

“Wow!” he praised us. “Just the two of you did all that?”

“I doubt all the population is dead as of yet,” I related. “In their panicked flight from our onslaught, they were killing one another as everything burned down around them. I imagine there have to be some of them left alive, there were so many of them fleeing in every direction.”

“Not for long!” Nabu pointed out. He continued surveying the destruction.

“Oh - hey, guys!” Dysnomia called up to us. She was just finishing getting dressed. She cleaned and sheathed her sword, then climbed up the rock to join us. She sat against me and let her weight rest on my side, while she laid her head on my shoulder.

“I really like tall, slaughtery you!” She told me. I looked over to her and she gave me a long, passionate kiss. Nabu shook his head.

“What are the two of you up to, and did anyone think to bring any food with them?” she inquired.

I nudged Nabu with an elbow. “Do we have time to eat before the surge arrives?” I asked him. “Or should we wait a few minutes?”

“It’s difficult to judge the distance from this far away, but…” he gave the coast another look-over with the telescope. “Actually, I believe it’s arriving now!”

The sounds of waves washing across the beach below had stopped making any noise a while ago. Now, however, a loud, steady roar could be heard building momentum by the second. I pointed down to the coast.

“Check this out!” I advised my slaughtering date, as I pointed. She was obviously more interested in food at that moment. Until the water level began to rise, and debris from the previous night’s violence began to be washed up the shore, towards us.

“This is serious business!” Nabu gasped. The both of us rose to our feet.

“This is amazing!” Dysnomia huffed as she stood up beside us.

“Are we even high enough?” I asked Nabu. “Should we move uphill some?”

“This should be fine!” he vowed.

The sight of an inexorable force of nature making its way inland was just about the most disparaging thing I’ve ever witnessed. There was no stopping it, as it continued its way up the beach. The low-lying sand dunes upland from the beach disappeared. The unfinished, much damaged walls of the city below crumbled and fell into the surging waters. Dead bodies intermingled with broken lumber and canvases from tents and sails. Huge rocks tumbled upward from time to time, only to disappear back into the foaming, muddy waters.

Finally, only half a furlong from the rock where we perched, the wave crested and began the slow process of finding its way back to the Gulf.

The natural harbor was gone, when the water finally receded back into its bed.

“Makes me kinda feel insignificant,” I said. The others were too awestricken to say anything.

The surge had completely transformed the coastline. It was difficult to make out where the city walls had been.

“I don’t think I’ve ever grasped how mighty my Grandfather’s realm truly is,” Nabu whispered. He found his voice again. “It’s always been so vast and mysterious to me.”

“What say we feast in honor of Oceanus and Enki?” Dysnomia suggested, her mind firmly set on food.

“Mount up, and I’ll get us back to a feast in Babylon in just a few minutes!” I promised her. She gave my shoulder a kiss in appreciation. I kissed her forehead in return. How sweet. I had no idea Dysnomia had a sweet side to her. I kinda got a little crush on her just then, and gave her a smile.

But, as promised – once we had our horses saddled and were sitting astride them, we were suddenly emerging from the clouds onto the road leading to Babylon’s main gate.

The Shining Dawn’s Ordeal - and Why Autonomia’s Heart Can’t be Broken

As Mysti and I rode off to find Dysnomia, Autonomia walked back to the rock and tree where Nanshe had tried to end her life.

Savannah sat on a high dune nearby, looking across the plain to where Nanshe's People camped. She was sobbing quietly, but her entire body shook with the effort.

"Oh, Autonomia!" she called out. "I didn't know love could hurt!" Autonomia reached over to set a hand in the middle of her sister's back.

"I didn't know!" she continued, through deep, wrenching sobs. "Love hurts so much! I don't want to live anymore! How can I live without Nanshe? I love her so much!"

Autonomia pulled her close, "Sucks, don't it?" she observed.

Savannah cried nonstop for four hours, occasionally lamenting, "I wanna die!" before she finally fell asleep on Autonomia's lap. Who pulled out a blanket, covered them with it, and snuggled up to her Divine sister.

Autonomia does not *get* heartbreak - her heart's never been broken. She won't allow it. She has eternities to win someone over, and she's **extremely** lovable.

Here's how it works: someone she'd grown very fond of decided he didn't need the love of a Goddess. I mean, how stupid can one get? A Goddess – an adorable, sweet Goddess who loves to party and dance. She hung out the night Nanshe's generation had their big, life-and-history changing party, and danced with them until dawn, for instance.

So, she confronted him. She wasn't angry, she was sort of befuddled.

"I love you!" Autonomia whispered to him, exactly the way she does when they're making love. "Do you think I'll let you go, you silly, stupid Mortal? Why, I'm a Goddess, I am - and a right powerful one at that! Why would
you refuse the love of a Goddess?"

"You know," he replied, "Mortals don't usually have such good luck with Goddesses."

"Oh, ye of little faith," she muttered under her breath. And suddenly, they were sitting on a cliff, over-looking a mighty ocean, who's waves continuously crashed over the tremendous rocks along the base of the cliff where they sat.

"Where are we?" Naturally, he was scared out of his wits at the sudden change of scenery.

"Look over there!" she pointed out. When he looked that way, he beheld dozens and dozens of huge, hairy creatures in the grassland behind the cliff. Many of them had these tremendous, curving tusks that were easily fifteen or twenty feet long.

He sprang to his feet. "What are they?" he further inquired.

"In other realms, similar beasts are called 'Mammoths!'" she explained.

He remarked, "Well, they certainly live up to the name!"

"Good," Autonomia thought, "At least he's got *some* wit to him!"

"Are they dangerous?" he asked.

"Not really, unless you fuck with their offspring. They HATE that!" she informed her intended.

“Well, who wouldn’t?” he said. And Autonomia thought about babies all of a sudden. She’d have really cute babies with most of the guys she adored, like this one.

“They are vegetarians, and only eat grasses, nuts, and fruits,” she lectured. “And they are sweet, gentle, and highly intelligent.”

She let him sit in silence for a little while. He didn’t have anything much to say at that point. She broke their silence by piping up; “Wanna know how to get on their good sides?” She only paused for a fleeting moment, then added: “Play with their kids!”

She took to her feet then and wandered over to where the gigantic beasts were grazing and trampling down the grasses in order to bed down for the night. One of them made a quiet trumpeting noise with its trunk – which was almost as long as its tusks. Other Mammoths then formed a protective barrier between the Humans and the rest of the herd. The rest of the herd, except for the curious, young ones. They formed another arc around their protectors and parents.

When the young ones started to appear, Autonomia knelt down and sang a sweet, sweet lullaby to them. They instantly began to sway in time to the song. Worked like a charm, every time. She cut the song short, and one of the beasts cautiously approached her, while it pretended to graze and stomp down a sleeping nest.

“Darling – I just *love* you!” she squealed. The creature trotted over to stand in front of her.

Her intended slowly, slowly walked over as well, then sat on the grass a few feet behind my daughter. The little Mammoth then extended its trunk, and Autonomia leaned into it with her head. The calf caressed her head for a second, then give it a good whiff. Followed by a little appraisal with its trunk. The other Mammoths laughed – or did the Mammoth equivalent of laughter.

Autonomia leaned forward to caress the beast with her head again, but this time she took to her feet and put her arms around the calves’ trunk. Then, she began to sway, back and forth. The little Mammoth ***loved*** it! The calf lifted her, and she freed herself from its grasp, while doing a somersault onto the creature’s back. She landed on one foot, raised her arms, and gave a “Ta-Da!”

The adults gave out murmuring trunk calls and swayed back and forth. “They’re applauding me,” she told her
guest.

The other youths crowded around then, and took turns lifting her and passing her around, which delighted Autonomia to no end. She giggled and rolled around, but finally made a “dismount” move that contained numerous twists and somersaults. She landed on the ground, back towards where she had originally come from, and the parents began to herd their children to their evening nests.

Some of the others who had formed the barrier between her and the rest of the herd came over and gave her presents – ripe fruits and nuts.

Autonomia looked over the items on offer at this point, and picked up the one that's similar to mangoes.

"Oh, these are sooo good!" she gushed. (*Seriously, she's on the prowl, and will soon have her way with her intended. She gushed at this point. You know what I mean.*)

She took her pocket knife out and peeled back some of the skin, then offered it to the person with her. "These are so juicy and delicious!" she promised. "Just peel the skin back and eat the orangey parts!"

Naturally, juice would start to dribble out of the hapless person's mouth, and drip down his neck and shoulders. And Autonomia pounced on her prey, to lick and slurp up the juices.

And it was on.

Sometime later, the two of them were at rest, lying in a thick bed of clover, holding hands, watching the sky overhead.

They were on the rather overly large moon of a gas giant planet, which itself was in orbit around a Red Giant star. The planet *could* take up quite a lot of the sky to the north, as the moon orbited around it. The red giant tended to dominate the sky, though. On this particular occasion, it filled the entire sky, with the planet in its central realm, and various other moons and orbital debris shining here and there. Light from other heavenly objects was not visible, for obvious reasons.

"I love this world!" Autonomia informed her lover, at some point, later that night. "It's pristine! A pure incubator for life, and in so much variety.

"No primates, though," she said as she shook her head. "I don't know why. Guess primates get to be too selfish at some point in their evolution…?

"Here, in my realm," she tried to sneak that by him, "everything co-operates with one another. Everything is in symbiosis with the other things in its vicinity. And if something is not provided by the interactions of the stuff already there, and it is needed in order to adapt to environmental or energetic changes in the environment, something will just pop up out of nowhere – actually, from out of the sub-soil - and it will provide what is needed. And everything will welcome it into their community, and everything will continue to thrive and evolve. It's amazing!

"Say the word, and you and I will be the founders of a race of People here. And I'll protect our offspring from the dangers inherent with inbreeding by continuing to bring along others who catch my eye and heart.

"There will be a lot of us, pretty quickly," she vowed. "I tend to love just about everyone I meet at parties," she told him. "If it's a really good party, I'll fuck everyone there." She had to chuckle then: "I'm timeless!"

She concluded, “I really like being me.”

So, her whole strategy from that point forward was based on the notion that if her intended complained about anything, absolutely anything at all, it was a certain sign they weren’t making love enough. So, she redoubled her efforts to pacify her prey.

Somewhat later, she came running up on her latest prize, grabbed him around the shoulders, gave him big hugs, and spin him around and around until they fell over, and covered his face with kisses.

“Guess what?” she asked. She didn’t even give him time to respond before she related; “We’re PREGNANT!”

And, of course, she made love with him until he was well past the point of complete exhaustion, and maybe on the brink of death. At which point, he was too weak to roll from off of her, so she made him comfortable where he collapsed, while she cooed into his ear: “I’m so happy! I can’t believe how happy I am, here with you!

“I hope you like big families, because your love is just too, too sweet.” She gave a huge sigh. “I love you!” she told him. They laid quietly for a while, catching their breath.

“So, are you staying or what?” she asked at last.

“You…” he gulped. “…make it…so hard t…to…say no…”

“Then don’t say no,” she advised him.

“I can’t!” he suddenly realized. “I can’t say no! That would be so stupid.”

“I told you that before we came here,” she castigated him. “You should really try to listen to and appreciate
other’s words.”

What else could he say at that point, but “Yes, my love!”

“And – leave it to me – there’ll be a community of thousands of us here in a few months.”

She finished explaining, “It takes an entire, supportive community to raise sweet, healthy kids.”

My Ordeal

I found my girls huddled together, under a nice, warm blanket. The heat of the day was beginning to creep onto the grassy meadow where they slept. I sat on one of the blanket's corners.

Autonomia woke up first. She crawled out from under the blanket and sat next to me, then laid her head on my shoulder. "You did it again!" she praised me.

"Me?" I exclaimed. "What have I done, ever?"

Autonomia knows me and my moods. She sighed and let things ride.

"Savannah figured out the Gizmos!" I informed her. "Fuck if I don't suspect she ***invented*** the damn things!"

"Dysnomia does all the slaughtering! You were the one who made things right for Nanshe and her People. What have I done, **ever** – tell me one thing! I'm a complete fraud! A phony! I'm nothing!"

"And we all love you to death, and you love us like no one else! All of us!" Autonomia explained. "It's your superpower, it's your gift, it's your blessing! That's why we have the faith in ourselves to do the things we do." She said, then amended "Well, maybe except for Dysnomia.

"Our love for one another binds us together so tightly, nothing can penetrate it. Nothing and no one can come between us. And we go out and love more. We inspire all those we meet to expect more of themselves, to expect more from those around them, to expect more from life! And they become legends amongst their Peoples!

"So, just keep doing what you're best at – love us all up like no one else can. It's why we come to you. It's why we don't let you go. Because you've shown us, over and over – there is no power greater than love."

We sat there in silence for a few minutes.

"I suppose you're right," I finally said. "I've even written songs about that." The admission didn't really change my surly mood, though.

"I'm going to take off now," she told me as she stood. "I have certain projects in mind that will keep me busy for a good, long while - until I'm much, much older." She saw the hurt look on my face. "Don't worry – little me spends lots and lots of time with you. You spoil her, let her do whatever she wants, and you talk to her like she's a person, not like she's an annoying little brat."

"Who has **ever**…" I began, angry at the very idea.

“Don’t worry about it, just know,” she concluded, “it’s never you!”

“Now give me a squeeze and a hug and kiss good-bye!” I stood to do as she desired. “Next time you hold me in your arms, I’ll have just been born!” she said. And she was gone.

I sat down on the blanket again and listened to the breeze whistle quietly through the tree branches and tall grass. And felt Savannah’s arms wrap around me from behind.

“Good morning, m’lord!” she yawned. “Have you seen Autie?”

“She just left,” I said, as I gave her forearms some pats. I was still in a foul mood, for no real reason.

“Here, take these damned things!” I declared. I set the Gizmos and Bolt-thrower down beside myself. “By all rights, they’re yours.”

Savannah sighed and didn’t let me go.

“I go around making these huge proclamations and promises, but I have no idea what I’m doing. I’m just a huge fraud, and all I do is hurt everyone around me. I fucking suck! No wonder I was alone towards the end of my mortal existence!”

“Dad, shut up!” she scolded me. “You won again! You always win!”

“Autonomia won, honey,” I illuminated her. “All I did was stay out of her way.

“And I did nothing to protect you from having your heart broken. A few conversations with Nabu, and we would have sorted Nanshe out, and maybe you could have gone with her, when she returned to her People…”

“I’d be forever an outsider to them,” she said. “I like it right where I am.” She gave me a big squeeze.

“But…what about your sweet, dear heart?” I had to ask.

“You’re making things all better, just by being here for me,” she told me. “I can always count on you. You’ll never leave me. You’ll never hurt me. All you do is love me, and then love me even more!”

“You’re one of the more amazing Beings who ever manifested!” I said.

“And your love is the most potent force in the universe,” she said as she repositioned herself so she could lay her head on my lap. “Yesterday, I decided to believe in you, and instead of Nanshe losing her life, she got her life back – the one she was supposed to live.” She paused for a second to wipe tears from her eyes.

“And it wasn’t all Autonomia’s doing!” Dawn told me. “You inspired her to find a solution. You always do! You inspire everyone! You make people want to live up to your expectations.”

“When I was a Mortal, that cost people I cared about their lives.” I said, head bowed. I’d never said anything like that to anyone before. “They’d wind up lonely, forsaken by the half-wits all around us. Or they’d end their days in a drug-induced fog until they died of an OD or some sort of wretched, preventable accident. Or suicide. There just weren’t enough of us to band together and ease one another’s burdens.”

“And those experiences made you take it all more seriously, and you kept shouldering the burden yourself,” The Mistress of Mercy told me.

“I was going to try to whisk Nanshe away, somewhen far, far from here, where Marduk, or even you couldn’t find us.

“But, we would have spent our entire time together living like hunted beasts, always looking behind us, always wondering if it was time to move along. Instead, I chose to believe in you, and it happened again – like it always does: A solution was found, and now everyone can be happy! Even broken-hearted little me!

“I’m happy because I have you, and I have mom, and Autonomia, Baron, and your wonderful wives, Chloe and Zoe - and I know Nanshe is safe, and well-loved. And I don’t hurt anymore, not like I did yesterday. Everything worked out just fine, and we’re all happy and in love, and loved. Everything’s the way it should be, and I love you so much, you’ll never know.

“Now,” she said, as she began to sit upright again, “Let’s get you back to that incredibly beautiful wife of yours, before we’re missed.”

“You know that’s not even possible,” I reminded her. “We’ll return just in time to let Marduk know that Nanshe’s no longer a problem for him, seconds after he’s been informed she escaped.”

Ninkasi’s Ordeal

The clouds deposited us in front of Sarpanit’s and Marduk’s thrones, in the Banquet Hall. I clutched a fist to my heart and bowed my head. “My Lord!” I informed them, “My Lady! I tracked down Nanshe, and neither she nor her People, nor her tormentors will be of any trouble to you again!”

The celebrants who heard gave cheers. Marduk and Sarpanit nodded.

“As you can imagine, this has been a very trying experience, and I wish to return to your sister’s suites here in order to rest. I await your summons!” I turned and stumbled away.

I spoke dryly. It was clear to anyone who knew me, I was emotionally done-in. I could not go on much longer, and when I returned to Ninkasi’s bedroom, I collapsed onto her bed and slept the sleep of the dead.

Ninkasi shook me sometime later. “Come on, Gaian!” she cajoled me. “Marduk’s sent for us.”

A Royal Guard escort awaited us in the hallway outside Ninkasi’s suites. They formed a tight, protective phalanx around us. Or maybe they formed a confining phalanx around us, to prevent us from escaping.

We finally reached a conference/interrogation room in the tower which held the Royal Suites. There were two huge thrones there, and we took our places across from them. Nabu sat in the space between his mother’s throne and his Aunt Ninkasi.

The Royal Couple entered, we greeted one another, and sat down. Nabu whipped out some parchments and a quill. He was going to act as the stenographer.

“There is much we have to discuss, and I doubt we’ll have all our concerns taken care of today.” Marduk began.

Sarpanit joined in, “Perhaps we could re-convene when the feasting is over, and continue our talk at our leisure then!” she suggested. “If need be…”

“That’s very likely the way it will be,” Nabu evaluated.

“Okay, so we’ll concentrate on what Gaian has to say to my sister!” Marduk proclaimed, uncharacteristically concerned for the well-being of my Love.

“Go ahead, Gaian, tell her!” he added.
I shot him a nasty look and thought, “Thanks a lot, buddy!”

My sweet Ninkasi took my hand. This was not going to be easy.

“My love, some people from my time found Dummuzi’s grave.” I gave her hand a squeeze. She rolled her eyes and looked away from me.

“It was becoming more difficult to keep up with interesting stories around that time – the censuring of information in my time was just beginning to pick up traction.” She was obviously

not pleased, and refused to look my way. “So, I don’t know where they took him, but I have a fairly good idea.”

I shot Nabu an inquiring look. “I’m just assuming his body went to the Vatican – formerly the temple of Cybele.” I thought aloud.

“I would have to believe that is correct,” Nabu hesitantly seconded. “I doubt there’s anyplace else where he could be properly confined…and brain-washed.”

“Oh, stars above!” Ninkasi wailed. She bowed her head down and allowed it to flop onto the table before her. “Do I have to sit here and listen to this?” she turned her face towards her brother and asked.

Sarpanit reached over and took Ninkasi’s other hand in hers. “What makes you think the body they found was his?” she asked me.

“He was seven feet, five inches tall, somewhat barrel-chested,” I answered, “and wore a red-and-blue outfit that I took to be his Fleet Commander uniform. And he wore a crown, with a mask of gold over his face.”

My dear wife lifted her face from the table and placed her hands around her mouth. “That was him, alright,” she said. “What do they want with him, after all this time?” She was crying.

“They likely desire to clone him so he can portray their blasphemous version of himself.” I concluded, “The one in that wretched, little book of theirs.

“But, they just have no idea what or who they are messing with,” I speculated. “I cannot imagine they will have much success with getting him to go along with their idiotic schemes… and that’s when things get…whacky stupid.

“They’ll never admit their lies, and we may well be on the verge of another dark age, wherein damn near ***everyone*** who knows how to read and write, in any language, will be slaughtered.”

“The signs are there,” Nabu confirmed: “Suffering and ignorance for a long, long time, and possibly the end of the Human Race.”

“I can’t do this again,” the Goddess of Brewing informed us. “Please, Marduk – I beg of you!”

Marduk made eye contact with me. “See?” he said with his eyes.

“Believe in me, my darling,” I asked of her. “And if you can’t believe in **me**, can you believe in our love?”

Ninkasi dropped my hand, stood up, and slapped me across the face. My vision went momentarily black and I saw many colorful, pretty stars before my vision returned to normal, a few seconds later.

“There!” she told us. “I feel much better now!” she returned to her seat.

“Now, they found a corpse, not a live body, and they would likely have cloned him,” I surmised as I tried to wipe the soreness from my jaw. I took a sip of the Revitalizing Brew.

“That’s never worked out,” Nabu told us.

“The methods we use are much superior to the ones you’ve utilized in the past,” I bragged. “They can grow exact replicas of every one of his internal organs, and place them in their proper places,” I asserted. “In the end, what they’ll have is an exact duplicate of his body, as it was at the moment of his death.” I cleared my throat. “They’ll even likely be able to re-grow any missing parts.” I tried not to look my beloved’s way, and shot Marduk a very dirty look. He looked away.

“I can’t even imagine he would not have all his memories intact,” I hypothesized. “Even if they did something stupid and horrible to try to erase his old memories, they would fail.” I paused to take a few deep breaths. Ninkasi’s slap might have fractured my jaw. I didn’t look into it, because I just didn’t want to know. It was enough to know that I’d offended and hurt her: Whatever pain and suffering I felt at her hands, I deserved it.

“For one thing – you are much more powerful Beings than Humans are.” I said, after I swallowed a little blood. I reached for my glass of the Revitalizing Brew for another sip. “For another thing, these idiots who pass themselves off as ‘scientists’ in my era will never, ever just come out and admit ‘we don’t know.’ Instead, they’ll speculate forever about this thing or that, and never come up with a final agreement to enable the discovery of the best way forward.

“I’m just hoping they’ll err on the side of caution with Dummuzi – they’ll only get one chance to get this right, and they know it,” I said. “All their efforts to date in trying to ‘improve’ upon their methods have blown up in their faces.”

I tried to take my wife’s hand in mine again, but she moved it away. I did not see that coming. It hurt, I gotta say.

“Can we change the topic of discussion for a few minutes?” I asked. No one responded, so I continued, “I’ve always wondered why you…” I addressed my Goddess wife, “…you were never married.”

Ninkasi didn’t raise her head from the table. “Well…you see,” she hesitantly responded and cleared her throat, “I was one of the Mother Goddesses, way back when.”

“I keep forgetting that!” I exclaimed. “There wasn’t a lot of information left from that time, not in the culture I was raised in. And interesting tidbits often disappeared from the public sphere when they managed to surface, from time to time.”

Ninkasi wiped her face, sniffled again and told me, without looking my way, “No one’s ever asked me about this. Thank you.” She gave one of my hands a pat but quickly withdrew hers.

She needed a few seconds to keep her composure. After what I thought was a little while longer than really necessary, I asked “So, which one were you?”

“I was a Bee Girl!” Ninkasi informed me.

“Holy molé,” I thought. Queen Bees can lay up to 2,000 eggs per day! She must have provided the majority of the sterile, hybrid Humans.

“Damn, girl!” I spoke in wonder, “You must have been one of the most revered of all the Mother Goddesses!”

“Yeah!” she said to the table beneath her face.

“But, one day, that weirdo creep Sin jacked off into the vat they’d used to make the original Humans in. After another batch was brewed out of that vat, we had fertile Humans all of a sudden. No one needed us Mother Goddesses anymore. And, after my last babies died off, there’d be no one to praise me, or take care of me!

“And I was disgustingly huge!” She told the table. “That’s why I have such a big bed - I needed it!”

“Whoa!” I thought to myself.

“Well, one day, I was sitting outside, in the garden, crying.” She turned her head to look my way. “I did that a lot, back in those days.

“And my brother, Dummuzi heard me.” She sniffled a little and shifted her face, to rest on her other cheek. “He came to me and asked, ‘Dear, sweet sister, whatever ails you so, on such a fine, spring day?’

“I told him: ‘I’m a fat beegirl, and I’m never going to find a good husband!’

“‘But, my sweet Ninkasi – you already have! He is here now, at your side!’ He told me, then he came to my side and sat next to me. He held me while I cried some more.

“We had been very close when we were young, Dummuzi and I. I think we both just assumed we’d be married someday. But I thought he didn’t want me anymore.”

(*I suppose you need to know a little about Sumerian Laws concerning succession and heirdom and such. There’s a whole, long, and not so very interesting story about this – and it concerns wrestling – but, in the end, what it all came down to was that children born of a union between brother and sister had the highest standing in such matters – their children outranked any other children born to either of the parties in their marriages, no matter who else was involved, no matter their ranking. Unions between brother and sister are common in their culture.*)

Ninkasi put both of her hands on the tabletop and gave herself a mighty heave upwards. In the same motion as she rose, she reached over and grabbed Marduk by his lapels with one hand, while she pulled him to his feet. Before any of us could react, she slapped him – with much more force than she'd used with me – then gave him a returning backhand, then slapped him again – even harder than the first time, and tossed him back down onto his throne. "You ASSHOLE!" Ninkasi shouted as she swatted him.

Nabu, I should mention, did not come unseated. I'm not sure if that was due to shock, or because he loves his aunt, or because he thought his father had it coming. Sarpanit looked confused. Only two Beings had ever socked the mighty Marduk around, and we share a House. I felt rather proud.

Marduk stroked his face as his Queen poured him a pint of the Revitalizing Brew. He took a big drink from the

brew, then told his sister; "It's been one of the greatest regrets of my life, and if I hadn't been such an impulsive hothead when I was younger, I would have seen Dummuzi was the pride of Father's House, beloved and entrusted by the Emperor Himself. And, though he was a most excellent ruler during his times in charge of the Earth Colonies, he never desired to be a ruler. As in every task he undertook, when something was asked of him, he excelled at his duties. He was a brother to be proud of, not one to be suspicious and jealous of."

Sarpanit gave her husband, the Emperor of Babylon, a reassuring pat on his hand.

Marduk was crying. I refuse to believe it was from the pain Ninkasi's slaps had caused him. These tears came from a deep, deep wound, which had festered for a long while, and needed excising in order for healing to begin. I was happy for him. And so, so proud of my beautiful, ***powerful***, beloved Ninkasi. She needed release from her pain as much as her eldest brother did.

And suddenly, I knew how to begin the healing process with him and my other wife, Eris. It was going to be easy, and no one would get slapped around, like Marduk and I did. I hoped.

Nabu made himself busy by making sure we all had fresh pints of beer in front of us.

When he was finished, he rose to his feet and held his pint aloft. "May today be remembered as a turning point in our two Houses fortunes! May marital bliss lead us *all* to unexpected, but well-deserved, rewards."

It was a bit grand for us to comprehend at the time, but it certainly sounded like something very toast-worthy, so we all picked up our pints and made a concerted effort to drain them. Only Ninkasi and Nabu succeeded. Sarpanit still looked a bit shaken, but the amount of the brew she downed soon took care of that.

"Let's continue with the discussion about Dummuzi and his corpse." I proposed.

Ninkasi crossed her arms beneath her breasts. I swear, I think she was evaluating whether or not to swat me again. At least she was sitting upright now.

Hearing no objections voiced, I continued, “I’m not about to pretend I know how things work in this realm, but in the one I’m most familiar with, the soul cannot be completely destroyed, it can only be transformed into one thing or another, depending on one’s attitudes towards death, and one’s expectations upon that solemn moment.

“That leads me to conclude that Dummuzi’s soul is somewhere about.” I broke off my speculation to look around the table and make brief eye contact with everyone. “I’m proposing to locate his soul and unite it with his clone. I cannot see a downside to this situation. Not even if it costs me the love of my darling Ninkasi, should she be reunited with her first love.” Ninkasi raised her eyebrows at me.

“I would think that any differences in the newly-minted Dummuzi and his former self would scarcely be noticeable at first, and would disappear over time. The longer his soul and cloned body are together, the more of himself he’ll become.”

Ninkasi looked like she’d heard it all before, and was not about to be taken in by my casual re-assurances.

“All I can add at this moment is that I’m going to proceed with this – with or without anyone else’s aid. I feel like it’s what I was born to do, moreso than anything else I’ve ever felt. And, just so you know, this has not been an obsession in my life: It’s only recently entered my mind that it’s a possibility.

“But, because such a possibility **does** now exist, I feel compelled to attempt this. And it certainly doesn’t hurt my cause that I have the means to accomplish the task. I can move between realms at will. I can move through time. I can count on the help of Savannah and Autonomia, who are very likely more powerful than any of you have realized, as of yet.

“Everything I rely on these Gizmos on my arms and the clouds from Ninkasi’s Halls to do, those girls can do on their own. I will, too, once I’ve settled into my new existence.

“The only other thing I have to say at this point is that **IF** My Lord Dummuzi’s soul is still hanging around, it’s because he is ***expecting*** me to attempt this. And there has to be some reason as to **why** I feel such fierce loyalty to him.” I came to the end of my narrative.

We sat in silence for a while. Ninkasi looked around after a few seconds and noticed Marduk as he wiped away the tears he’d been crying. She was suddenly overcome by a sense of wonder, which mingled with compassion. Her expressive face gives away her thoughts and feelings, every time.

She returned her gaze my way. It was like she suddenly believed in me – saw me for who I truly am. And her love for me reached an entirely new level. Like I mentioned previously, her thoughts and emotions couldn’t be more readable if they were spelt out on an oversized, digital billboard floating in the air above her head.

Nabu finally broke the silence. “Does anyone care to let Gaian know who he is?”

His aunt and father looked to one another. Sarpanit continued to look confused and left out of the conversation.

“He seems to be a lot like Ama’usumgal-ana,” Marduk offered. “As king, his name evoked terror in the minds of his contemporaries. But, he always felt inadequate, compared to our Race.”

“But more like his re-incarnation, Ani,” Ninkasi suggested.

“How about Seshat?” Nabu inquired.

Ninkasi gave me an appraising look-over. “Well,” she calculated, “he certainly has pretty eyes, for a man.”

“Precisely!” Nabu congratulated his aunt.

“Will someone spell it out for the guy who was but a mere mortal last week?” I asked. “Or whenever…I don’t even care anymore!”

“She created writing!” Ninkasi informed me. “But Nabu used her Egyptian name.”

“Remember what happened to the city where she dwelt amongst us?” he reminisced.

“Oh, yeah!” Nabu’s father and my wife reacted together.

“There was something vaguely familiar about you when I first met you,” my beloved interjected. “But, at the same time, I just couldn’t put my finger on what it was…”

“She used to write love poetry to you,” Marduk reminded her.

“Ooohh!” Ninkasi recalled. “She used to love me very much!”

“***And I do now***,” a voice spoke through my mouth. (*I don’t know if* ***you’ve*** *ever experienced anything like that, but it’s very unsettling. At first. After a while, there is little differentiation between the entities – they consolidate into one Being. Unless one entity is unwelcomed, which is an entirely different matter.*)

“Hmmm,” Ninkasi reflected to herself.

“You always refused us, when we offered to make you one of us,” Marduk upbraided my former self.

“Would you please address me as my current self?” I beseeched them.

"***I told you I didn't need your help***," the voice spoke through me again. I felt like a ventriloquist's dummy. "***And that I'd join you when I felt I was ready***."

"But…you seem so unsure of yourself, at times," Nabu observed.

"***I'm not sure this is what I want – to be here***," the voice said. "***Except, I truly desire to bring Lord Dummuzi back to your realm, if it can be done***."

"See, that's what I mean," Nabu pointed out. "When you speak as Gaian, you sound so sure of yourself, but when you speak as your former self, you seem to not believe what you are saying."

"***It's a guy thing***," she said through me again. I wasn't enjoying this at all.

Ninkasi guffawed. "I know what you mean!" she blurted out. "And I like the self-confident you best. It kinda turns me on." She took one of my hands and shivered.

"You can say that again!" Sarpanit seconded. She wrapped up her mighty husband's arms with hers and took one of his hands in both of hers. "Me-rrrrow!" she trilled, and shook her head and shoulders.

Marduk and I exchanged uncomfortable glances. Marduk suffered – to that very day – because he acted in haste in the past, instead of considering the consequences to his actions. I just felt uncomfortable at having the covers pulled off my ego, in a manner of speaking.

"***So, we're going to revive and restore Dummuzi,"*** we continued – that voice and I. "And I'd like the help of those more familiar with the Beings and places I need to meet and travel to in order to do so," I concluded.

Nabu and Marduk looked to one another.

"Those who could help you the most…I'm afraid…" Marduk's son and heir began.

"***We know, so we'll start out with a minor miracle in order to quell any doubts that we can do this***," we said.

"***We'll restore Inanna to her sanity***," we proclaimed.

No one said anything. Enki's children and grandchild sat in silence. They looked discombobulated.

"***If it can be done***," we amended. "***Otherwise, we'll find a way for her to assist us, no matter how damaged she is***."

"If it can be done," I appended, "I'll find the way."

Marduk sighed. “It looks as if this inquiry has reached its conclusion. My wife and I must prepare for your formal reception this evening,” the God/Emperor of Babylon declared. “There are other matters I wish to discuss with you, but it can wait until the feast has concluded.

“Tonight, you’ll meet the most important of the citizens in my Sacred City. It will seem like an ordeal, and you might question why your time is being expended in such a manner – that is, until you require a service or product they provide. Then, you’ll learn their value.”

“Until this evening, then,” Sarpanit said, as she pushed herself to her feet.

“Until this evening,” the rest of us echoed, and we all took to our feet and left the room.

Meet the Babylonians

That evening, we – Savannah, Ninkasi, and I – met the creme-de-la-crème of the Babylonian elite. Merchants, Tailors, Blacksmiths, Carpenters, Masons, Military Officers, Naval Commanders, Builders, Scholars, Merchant Sailors – among the wealthiest of them all – and Overland Travelers and Export Merchants. They all seemed very confident in themselves, and their value to Babylon, their King, and the world in general. I took a liking to most of them, right away. The ones I wasn’t so sure of had wives who were noble, elegant, and certain of their worth. They sorta made up for any misgivings I had about their spouses.

By the time the last of them had been introduced, Savannah and I were considerably wealthier. The extravagant gifts they bestowed upon us! A necklace made of huge stones of Lapis Lazuli – already a rare and precious commodity in their time. Gold jewelry! Silver Jewelry! Platinum jewelry! A collection of weapons made by the finest of Marduk’s Royal Blacksmiths, including lightweight body armor, a medium-sized shield, and mail-and-leather armor for Mysti.

At the end of the presentations, Alain strode forward, followed by a few of our musician friends, who pushed a crate.

“We’ve all been impressed with how quickly Gaian has improved as a performer the past week,” Alain explained to those gathered. “So, we’ve assembled a variety of instruments for your use,” he told me, “based on our experiences with you, and your natural abilities!”

He bowed very low, as his friends opened the case. Inside, there were six instruments hanging – two twelve-strings, two six-strings, a four-string bass, as well as a ten-string Chapman Stick. There were also a few percussion instruments I don't know the names of, but could sit down and jam on all night. No need to familiarize myself with them and their tones, I just intuitively understood how they worked, the sounds they produced, and could put together various rhythms at will. There were also a didgeridoo, and some thumb pianos.

I thanked Alain and our friends. He turned and announced to the crowd gathered in the Banquet Hall: "After the evening meal has been consumed, Gaian and his lovely companion, Lady Savannah, will join us in entertaining our Lord's fortunate guests. He's familiarized us with some of his favorite songs from his realm, and will bring tears to your eyes when he performs other songs you will all be familiar with.

"Now," he bowed again to the Babylonian elite, "enjoy your feast, while we entertain you with our own selections of contemporary ballads!"

The first part of the night is lost to me. All I remember is swirling music, dancing with my two girls, singing songs with and to Savannah Dawn, urging the Royal Couple to come to the dance floor while we performed tunes with rhythms and tempos which would compel one to take to their feet and shake their booties.

Since we didn't have amplification, we made up for it with numbers. We had seven people playing guitars, and

two on bass – one a standup bass! There was a percussion ensemble with eight people banging on shit. Savannah, BTW, is an excellent rhythm guitarist. She just slams out power chords, always in perfect time. We were fairly overwhelming, as a band.

The crowd demanded a second set from us, so after taking a break to eat and quench our thirsts, we played the tunes Alain and his friends had taught Savannah and me. They were songs of sorrow, lamenting fallen heroes – some from here on Earth, others on worlds far away and unknown to me and Savannah. The reaction of the audience let us know they'd never forget those fallen heroes. As Alain had predicted, there were tears in some Babylonian's eyes. Sarpanit's too. One song in particular caused her to take a seat and cry. It celebrated one of her demi-god ancestors, who had given up his life, that the rest of her family could survive. She ran over and hugged me and Savannah as the last chords faded away. The Babylonians gave us a standing ovation.

We took a little break, smoked some weed and drank a lot of rum. Then, we returned to play some of the shorter tunes the other musicians had complained about when we were camped, and jammed on them to our heart's content. We played a final set of around an-hour-and-a-half, but only managed to crank out around a dozen tunes.

We wore our audience out. I was exhausted by the end of the performance. Alain bowed to me and Savannah when we were finished. We were all sweating and breathing heavily. The performers joined hands and bowed to the audience, who shouted, gave cheers and whistles, and showered the dancefloor with gold and silver coins.

I leaned heavily on Ninkasi's shoulder as we made our way back to her suites. Two servants followed us, carrying little Autonomia and Savannah the Reaper. Once in her bed chamber, we settled into Ninkasi's magnificent bed and fell fast asleep.

Rewards and Reassurances

The third day of feasting was a lot of fun, too. There was a variety of entertainment spectacles – some sponsored and endorsed by Marduk's on-hand guests. Jugglers, acrobats, and dancers filled the times between performances by poets, magicians, and theater troops. Every performance was absolutely spine-tingling. Before the evening meal was served, the performers paraded through the tables with buckets for the guests to toss coins into. From the looks of things, some of them became fairly wealthy that afternoon. A Command performance before the Imperial Couple themselves was quite an accomplishment, and the rewards often surpassed the most outlandish hopes for the entertainers. Some of them had to hurry out of the Hall just so no one would see them break down in tears at the number of coins in their possession.

It was Sarpanit's custom to have guest rooms provided for the performers, for a day before and a week afterwards. She would encourage them to take their time, and spend their money here and there on things they once felt were luxuries. She assigned Royal Guards to each one, to prevent them from being robbed – especially by the merchants around town who might want to take advantage of someone with a lot of uncharacteristically expendable wealth.

While in the Palace, Sarpanit gave them so many amenities – their own guest baths, access to the Royal Tailors, a never-ending buffet of freshly-prepared foods, weapons training by their guards/escorts – to ensure they held on to the coins they had leftover at the end of her hospitality. Almost to the last person, they would stop by Sarpanit's temple and leave a few coins in thanks to their patroness Goddess. The few who didn't usually left coins for Marduk's temple, in thanks for giving them such an opportunity.

Savannah saw what was happening and was taken aback because we had no coins. What use did we have for them, when Marduk and his House were providing everything we needed? She mentioned it to Ninkasi, who, in turn, mentioned it to Sarpanit. The Queen called a servant over, who looked toward Savannah and smiled. The servant scampered out of the Hall, and shortly returned with a smallish bucket made of copper. She hauled it over to Savannah Dawn and handed it to her.

"Her Majesty has asked that you reward your favorite performers with at least three gold coins apiece. There are so many here," she gave the bucket a shake, "you can also give an occasional handful to those who truly moved you. And be sure to save a few for tonight's storytellers."

Sarpanit whispered something to Ninkasi, who whispered it to me. I turned to Savannah. “The Queen says any leftover coins will be given to our musician friends, but not to worry if none are left over. Seems like everyone took note of the fact that we did not gather a share of the coins tossed out for the musicians last night. They all – musicians and guests alike – feel like we are very generous.”

Savannah had no experience with money in her entire existence, so she wasn’t worried about any of that at all. She did note how happy it made people when she tossed coins into their buckets. And she tossed a handful into those of at least a handful of the performers. I just nodded a lot and would snatch up a coin now and then to add to what she gave. Seriously – most performers here would consider it a blessing from above to receive as many as five gold coins for their efforts. Tonight, though, some were having difficulty carrying their wages around, there was so much.

I’ll give Marduk’s elite some credit – they kept plenty of coins on hand in order to reward the entertainers. Many of the performers had been at it for their entire lives, some descended from generations of such ensembles. And it genuinely showed.

After the last of the artists departed to their own, post-performance feast in their quarters, Nabu stood up and gave a serving tray a few raps with a knife.

“If I may have everyone’s attention, I have an announcement of grave proportions!” He shrugged his shoulders and seemed to look unsure of what he was about to say. But, he soldiered on. He turned to his date, Nanaya, and held out his hand.

“Lady Nanaya, the Irresistible…” she took his hand and stood by his side, “…has agreed this very morning to accompany me on my life’s journey - as my wife.” They were both clearly moved by the announcement - made in public, no less. As with any newly-engaged couple, they wondered what they were getting themselves into, but it was also quite evident they cared about one another very much.

Everyone in the Hall jumped up and cheered and whistled. Babylonians had wondered for a long while when Nabu would begin to step out of his father’s shadow and claim his own place in the world. And Nanaya! Who would ever think she would settle down and marry? Absolutely no one, that’s who! When those gathered cheered so loudly, and for so long, she threw herself into his arms and kissed him until the cheering began to subside. Nabu beamed with pride. He was certain he’d made the right decision. Nanaya settled back into her seat as Sarpanit, Ninkasi, and Savannah rushed over to her to give her congratulatory hugs and kisses. The Empress and Nanaya were in tears. Savannah was just so happy, she smiled her brightest smile and took one of Nanaya’s hands in hers. This outpouring of affection was beyond anything Nanaya had ever encountered. Though she was well-loved by all, she had basically been orphaned by her parents when they returned to their homeworld. She didn’t have strong ties anywhere, except for Uruk, which was the Sacred City of Enki – Nabu’s grandfather. Being an adventurer, however, he was usually off somewhere, doing his thing. So, he declared her to be his Regent. In his absence, she was Queen of Uruk.

Before the ruckus completely died down in Marduk’s Banquet Hall, several women made ululations. “Ul-lu-lu-lu-lu-lu!” they chorused, which caused Nanaya to lean forward and shake her boobs. (*It’s something in her DNA. Really! Next time you see her walking your way, give it a try. Do that “Ul-lu-lu” thing and see if she doesn’t shake those boobies. She will!*)

Marduk stepped over to his son and slapped him on his back. “About time you did something about giving me grandchildren to spoil!” he proclaimed, just loudly enough for me to hear. I remained where I was seated and offered Nabu a toast with my newly-arrived goblet of beer.

When people began to calm down, I took to my feet and held the beer above my head. “To the young couple – may they find married life to their liking!” It was a lame toast, but we’d *all* been taken by surprise.

Still, there were hoots of agreement, followed by near silence as people drank. When they’d reached their fill, there was another loud cheer. Nanaya looked relieved, as if she suddenly realized she’d given the right Being the right answer. She took Nabu’s hand in one of hers and used a napkin to dry her eyes with the other.

Servants made the rounds to all the tables to offer everyone a tumblerful of Cognac. Several revelers took a careful sip. Such expensive liquors were rare in their realm. Not that they were all that difficult to obtain, but they rarely lasted for very long.

When he was satisfied everyone had their own glass of Cognac, the King had a servant bang a gong.

“Friends, honored guests, and Babylonians,” he bellowed as he stood. “Tonight’s feast has gained outstanding, unexpected significance! Lady Nanaya has been a welcomed guest in my family’s Halls since she was but a child. She has always delighted us with her ready smile, her jubilant laughter, her dazzling eyes, and exquisite beauty! I feel my son has made an excellent decision – he’s not the Lord of Wisdom for no reason!” Cheers and shouts briefly interrupted the King. Several people raised their glasses to sip a toast to Nabu.

Marduk raised his glass on high and continued: “I welcome Lady Nanaya into my father’s House, my House, and our families! A truly ravishing addition!”

“Aye!” the crowd roared before downing their drinks. Cheers mixed with coughs ended the fleeting quiet.

“Raise your glass if you require a refill!” Marduk advised the celebrants. He turned to his Queen and offered her his hand. She took it and hopped up from her throne to stand next to him. After they exchanged a brief kiss, the King took half a step back.

“I am so happy to welcome Lady Nanaya - Queen of Uruk, Aspect of Venus, Patroness of Faithful Lovers, Protector of Nursing Mothers, Nanaya the Irresistible, into my family. I could not love my daughter-in-law more if I had given birth to her myself…” she had more to say, but she was crying too much to continue. She did manage to raise her glass. Everyone gave a cheer and toasted Nanaya.

Nanaya dashed to Sarpanit’s side and helped Marduk guide her back to her throne. When Sarpanit attained her seat, Nanaya hugged her to her chest for a minute, then fell to her knees to rest her head on her soon-to-be mother-in-law’s lap.

I had to wonder how I came to know so little about her, and where I heard such negative gossip about her. I'd learned much about her from Sarpanit's toast.

For some reason, Eris has a low opinion of Nanaya. She sometimes refers to Nanaya as a "low-born princess of a dead and forgotten city." I'm going to have to investigate this someday. Considering just how superbly beautiful she's become, maybe Eris is just flat-out jealous of Nanaya, who everyone seems to really adore. As I've mentioned before, my lovely wife, the Goddess of Chaos, has never won over the hearts and minds of the Immortals. Though I have to think that Marduk's adulatory toast at Ninkasi's Hootenanny elevated her status in the minds of all present. Or at least the ones who didn't faint from shock.

For the rest of the evening, my mind wandered around in a drunken haze. Ninkasi came over to sit on my lap while we listened to the Story Tellers. Fortunately enough, there were no tragic tales of doomed lovers that evening. The opening story was a bawdy tale of a courtship that kept taking unexpected, hilarious turns, until the lovers finally gave in to their feelings and eloped.

The next one told of some forgotten king in a land lost to time, who changed the course of history. He was responsible for much of what defines this realm's civilizations. I forget his name, which is the point of the story – that fame and glory are mere wisps, borne away by the winds.

The final tale told of a wise and heroic woman whose People acclaimed as their Queen, and later revered as their patron Goddess. She had been a champion of those wronged by the inept and corrupt regime in her homeland.

As a child, she saw that people were suffering, and did anything she could think of to cheer them up or ease their burden. She'd nurse the sick back to health. She'd help shepherds track down strays, and fend off packs of predators who'd been preying on their flocks. She befriended the lonely and aged, and made sure to check in with them as frequently as she could. As she grew to become a fetching young woman, people everywhere bestowed praise and affection upon her. And, as often as they could, they would help her along her way with gifts of money, food, or valuable trade goods.

The King eventually learned of her and sent a detachment of soldiers to either subdue or kill her. All along their way, people begged the soldiers not to harm her. They offered the soldiers food and drink, then told of how their heroine had given them aid and helpful advice when they were unsure of their continued existence. Of how she had helped them trap and eliminate gangs of brigands who had tormented them for years, while the King did nothing. And so on…

When the soldiers arrived before her, they dismounted their horses, took to their knees, pledged their undying support, and vowed to be her Honor Guard - to stand between her and any forces sent to harm her.

Well, she was not one who would expect others to endanger themselves to fight for her, so she had them instruct her in riding and fighting. In a few short months, she had gone from being a sweet person who could help out those in need, no matter the cause, and grown into the Being

she is today – Durga, the mighty Warrior-Goddess, Protector of the Innocent, and Divine Hand of Justice.

It was discovered she was a Demi-Goddess, and the people of the Kingdom begged her to topple the corrupt regime and ascend to the throne. It's nothing she wanted for herself. She loved her life of adventure as much as the people she encountered loved her. She did agree that the King had to go, so she had her faithful soldiers train some young volunteers to ride along with them to the Kingdom's capitol.

A mighty army was sent against her much smaller forces, but she single-handedly made up the difference with her fierceness in battle. Watching her recklessly attack the much greater force inspired her followers to likewise rise to the challenge, and the King's mighty army was routed in a single afternoon. They were unaccustomed to having people fight against them.

The Royal family had fled well before Durga's troops attained the capitol city. No one knew what to do, so Durga took the Throne, but only until a suitable King could be found. She eventually discovered a good candidate amongst those who had accompanied her into battle. She proclaimed him to be her successor, then rode off into the sunrise, alone. The people erected a temple to her, and her High Priestess married the King.

The deposed King had fled to the land of his Queen, and there recruited an army, pledged to regain his throne and plunder the entire kingdom, to punish the people for rising against him.

Durga rode out to meet the invaders by herself. The capitol city – now her Sacred City – lay a couple of days journey behind her. She demanded there was no reason anyone should further suffer at the deposed King's hands, and that, unless he was a tremendous coward, she was willing to settle this one-on-one.

The former King made no reply, other than to laugh. No one laughed with him. After all, they were not his loyal subjects. Nor were they all that willing to endanger their lives for someone who might just happen to be a raging coward.

Durga amended her challenge to allow the King to bring along his sons, brothers, and nephews into battle with him. The king found this challenge more to his liking, so he and five of his relatives separated themselves from the rest of the armed forces and charged at Durga, who was taken a little by surprise by their sudden attack.

She drew her sword and began to walk her horse towards her enemies. As they approached, she held her sword aloft, and only brought it down when the King's men were within reach. She made one slash, one return slash, and sheathed her sword. She didn't even look around. Five men fell from their saddles, in ten pieces. The one-time King still sat astride his horse. Well, most of him did. His head lay on the ground, somewhere.

Durga walked her horse towards the invading army. "Make camp here!" She shouted to them. "And I will shortly return with as much of this carrion's wealth as I can find and transport. Let that be your reward for not throwing your lives away on behalf of those dead jackals!"

“We hear your offer and accept!” a general replied, after a quick consultation with his officers. “We will wait four days. On the fifth day, we break camp. If your words are proven to be true, we will leave this place in peace. If not, we will proceed with our original purpose of slaughter and plunder.”

Three days later, Durga returned at the head of a caravan loaded with gold, silver, precious metals and stones, and all sorts of jewelry, as well as bolts of fine linen and other expensive cloth. A few other carts were brought up, and upended, well behind the place where the goods were left. These other carts were loaded with the dead bodies of the detachment the invading forces sent to rob and kill Durga and any who accompanied her with the loot.

As the remaining invaders began to move towards their ill-earned gains, Durga had the carts which hauled the dead soldiers set aflame. The remaining carts were then upended, so as to cover the pile of corpses. So, while the invaders gathered their plunder, they were treated to the stench made by the burning flesh of their comrades.

Legend has it that the invading force never returned to their homeland. Along the way, they fought one another over their shares of the booty. Once they realized that everyone’s share increased when there were fewer people left to take one, most of them were doomed. It is said many deserted, and fled with as much loot as they could carry. But, no one ever heard of them again – not a single one of them. And out in the desolate western badlands of Persia, one can still find gems, gold, silver, jewelry of all types, hidden here and there in cracks and crevices. Some say the plunder carries a curse, though.

When this tale was finished, everyone finally shook themselves out of the spell the bard had us under. His story-telling was superb! He had been speaking for a couple of hours, pacing about, making wild gesticulations with his entire body at times. He had my undivided attention when he first mentioned Durga. As I’d mentioned before – I was earnestly interested in hearing the tales of my new stomping grounds.

He’d spoken for hours and had the rapt attention of nearly everyone in attendance. When he finished, people applauded, then cheered, then rose to their feet and showered him with coins, while continuing to shout his praise. Ninkasi shouted and tossed several coins of her own towards the orator. He made numerous low bows, as his family rushed out to hug him and gather his tips. A couple of servants went to his side and ushered him to stand before the Royal Thrones.

Marduk motioned for the crowd gathered to settle down. When he felt they had sufficiently done so, he shouted, “This has been a most entrancing telling of Durga’s rise to fame! I’ve heard it all before, but never so engrossingly presented, nor by such a compelling orator.

“Tell us your name, balladist!”

The orator knelt before the King and bowed his head, a hand over his heart, which must have been palpitating wildly by then. “I am known as Harold, the Long-Winded.” He smiled.

The King laughed quietly and strode forward. He held a small breastplate made of gold, which he placed around the man’s head and neck.

“I hereby name you Royal Bard, and invite you and your family to dwell in Babylon, here in my Royal Palace.”

Applause and cheers greeted the announcement. Marduk stepped aside.

Sarpanit walked over to Harold. She placed a Tiara worthy of a Royal Bard on his head. She offered him her hands, which he took in his own, as she helped him to his feet. Once upright, she leaned forward and kissed his cheeks.

“Welcome to our home! It is now the home of you and your family as well!” she told him. He was in tears now.

The Queen withdrew her hands, and Nabu stepped up. He presented the Bard with a staff made of obsidian and oak. It was crowned with a huge Opal, which naturally reflected light in myriads of ever-changing colors and sparkled at random.

“After breakfast, I will send servants over to look after your family, then we’ll take a tour of the Palace grounds,” Nabu leaned forward and told Harold. “I’ll show you to your family’s quarters, and you can then proceed to gather them there, and make yourselves at home.”

He held the Royal Bard at arm’s length and added, loudly enough for all gathered to hear, “Welcome home, brother!”

Nabu was prepared for the Bard’s collapse, as he was overcome with emotion and could not hold back the tears. Nabu caught him, gave him several pats on his back, then steadied and released him.

Nanaya then walked up, embraced him and kissed both of his cheeks. She’d just refreshed her lipstick, so she left huge lip-prints on his cheeks. She smiled at him and winked. He grew weak at the knees.

When Harold turned to face the home crowd again, a servant put a goblet of beer in his hands. Before he could take a sip, Ninkasi stood and raised her goblet high above her head. “To Harold, the Herald!” she whooped. She nearly laughed out loud.

A grand ovation followed, mingled with laughter and shouts: “To Harold, the Herald!”

When she sat down on my lap, Ninkasi kissed me on the cheek. “I totally didn’t think of that before I said it!” she told me. I kissed her cheek.

Harold slapped his forehead with a palm. He shook his head and smiled at my wife. She gave him a wink, too.

Before he could do any other thing, his three little children and their mother swarmed him. The cheering and applause regained momentum, and a couple of servants ushered them to a table

set up in front of Ninkasi's table. The table was immediately filled with a breakfast feast worthy of a Royal Bard's family.

The aroma from their table reminded us all that a new day had arrived, and we were starved! Servants shortly had every table overflowing with warm beverages, steamy, hot foods, and much beer.

"Dang!" my wife observed, "These Babylonians really drink! I'm depleting my reserves! I'm going to have a lot of work to do." She pouted. "I just want to plan our wedding with Eris!"

"Darlin'" I promised her, "bring that up the night after the Hootenanny's over, and I'll help you sort it all out!"

"It was over three days ago!" she told me. She looked very unhappy.

"I still have days four and five to go," I told her. She continued to stare at me.

"You may have forgotten something I did a few days ago, before you arrived here," I hinted at her. "Our time here has been very memorable!

"Wizard of the Everywhen, you know!" I gave myself a couple of taps on the forehead with a forefinger. "I can be whenever I want!"

Her default look for me is "I'm going to fuck you within an inch of your life, right now!" She was looking at me that way just then.

(*Perhaps I should explain just what the term "Wizard" implies in the next realm. It has significance far beyond what it's devolved to in my former realm.*

A true Wizard is more than a master of some skill or magical practice. A Wizard has added entire new possibilities to such, many of which were undreamt of by predecessors, or even contemporaries. The way Ninkasi has elevated brewing beer into a high art, then added magical powers to her concoctions. Certain blacksmiths have attained Wizard status by creating undreamed of magical items from basic, common ores once thought to be useless. In short, a Wizard takes skill, knowledge, and abilities to a level unparalleled in their craft. And continues to push the possibilities into unrealized territory.)

Nabu stepped over to us. "Pardon me, but I wanted to inform Gaian he is expected to make an exit speech after breakfast, so everyone present knows the time has come for them to meander back to wherever they came from." He gave me a pat on the back.

I'm not big on making speeches. Oh, I absolutely relish the idea of addressing crowds, I just prefer to have a guitar strapped around me when I do. As per usual, when presented with a task - like making a public speech - I just wing it. It usually turns out okay. I'm fairly personable, so I just try to make a connection with the crowd, let them know I see them for who they are, because I'm looking at them as who I am.

I was very happy to have been stuffing my face for so long. I could just sit back and enjoy the sounds and sights amongst the feasters. I rested my head against my wife's back and kept a fatherly watch on the girls. The Reaper and Shining Dawn were clearly enjoying one another's company. Autonomia made jokes about them, and they generally laughed. Though, there was remark which seemed to vex Savannah Dawn. She finally had to shake her head and smile, though.

Finally, as the heat of the day supplanted the damp chill of the morning, Marduk had a servant bang a gong again. People immediately cut their conversations short, and all eyes were upon Babylon's God/Emperor.

"My friends, family, and honored guests of Babylon" he said aloud. "We have never welcomed anyone such as Gaian into our city before. I thank you all for making him feel welcome!" He toasted the assembled Babylonians. Once again, the servants had made sure everyone had a glass of Cognac in front of them.

After a few seconds of silence, a call rang out from the crowd "Welcome, Gaian! And to all your House."

Now I was worried. This was formal toasting territory we were entering, and I had no clue about it – and neither Nanshe nor Mysti to turn to for advice. I gave Ninkasi a few bounces with my knee, in the hopes she'd take a clue and return to her own chair. Instead, she ground her butt into my crotch. I was certain to embarrass myself now, in a certain sense. Of course, I chose to do what I'm best at – I blew the concern off. Completely. And just decided to do the best I could, under the circumstances.

I gave Ninkasi a little nudge, and she slid over to her own seat. "Thanks," I whispered to her. "Now, what am I expected to tell them?"

"Just let them know how much you've enjoyed yourself, and that you look forward to spending time with many of them in the future, as you begin work on our Sacred City. That'll make 'em happy enough to drool!" she leaned over and gave me a quick peck on the cheek. "You're up!" she said, and handed me a glass of Cognac.

"I know," I thought, "and soon, half of Babylon will know, too."

Marduk was finishing his introductory remarks. "…I'll let him tell you in his own words – Gaian, the Invincible Resurrector!"

I stood and winced inside as I saw several eyes pop open wide as they affixed themselves to my crotch. I'm so glad there were no cameras or the such present. I rolled my eyes and tried to ignore their wide-eyed appreciation of the sight. The Ladies seated at the Royal tables chortled to one another, especially at my discomfort. As for Ninkasi, her eyes never left my crotch, as she gazed at me adoringly. I blushed.

"I want to thank each and every one here!" I raised my glass above my head. "The hospitality my companion…" I motioned towards the Savannahs: Shouts and cheers interrupted me for a

few seconds, "…and I received - since before our arrival – has been something we'll not soon forget! I look forward to meeting with many, many of you in the future, as I prepare to construct a Sacred City for my wives and I to dwell in, and raise our children!"

I was interrupted by cheers and hoots. They could practically smell the profits such endeavors would send their ways. The same way sharks smell blood in the water, from miles away. There was a feeding frenzy in their

futures, and I could almost see gold coins replace their irises.

"I am not about to dwell on the many tales and rumors I've heard about Babylon over the centuries." I gave a smile, a nod and a wink. "Now that I know they are all true!"

The guffaws that followed. I don't *think* I offended many of them, but I do believe I caught them off-guard with that one. "And the memories I'll carry from the days I've spent here are sure to stick with me for much longer than yours from two nights ago!" Now, they laughed in earnest, and many of them pounded their tables with their fists. Many people had spent much time grilling one another – the servants are under a vow of silence about the goings-on in Marduk's Halls – about what they had been up to that night. Like, why someone's wife wound up passed out beneath one of her neighbors. And so forth.

"I have nothing more to say at this point, except, Hail Marduk, Sarpanit, and the House of Enki! And Hail to you, citizens of Babylon!" I lowered my glass and drained it.

I felt kinda bad about leaving Nabu and Nanaya out of the toast, but I'm sure there will be ample opportunities to make up for that in the future. We seem to be getting to be fast friends. And I'm intrigued by his fiancé. There's much more to her than I've been led to believe.

After everyone settled down from my final toast, they began to gather themselves up and leave. Many came over to invite me and Savannah to visit their homes or places of business in the following days. I could only offer apologies, as I had pressing matters to attend to. I tried to be as gracious as I could. I even came close to asking some of them for their business cards. Ha!

After that, I spent a few days playing with little Autonomia and the Reaper, several nights playing with my concubine and wife, and just having the time of my life. The girls befriended Harold the Herald's kids, and spent the nights there, after they'd all worn each other out, running through the hallways, squealing ear-splitting girl screams, playing games, and making sure wine bottles were entirely empty. Few were, so the kids generally passed out shortly after the sun set.

When Savannah the Reaper finally had to return to work, Autonomia accompanied her to help her catch up.

I was surprised such things were allowed. "Is that even allowed?" I precautionarily asked the little Reaper.

Autonomia rolled her eyes. "**Pa**-pa!" she exclaimed. "We're Goddesses! We do…"

The three of us finished the thought together “…whateverthefuck (you)we want!”

“Okay,” I finally conceded, “Come here before ya’ll leave!” We traded hugs and kisses. They blew kisses to my wife and Savannah Dawn, then waved goodbye. And they were gone!

Promises, Promises…

The day after the banquet’s end, Nabu came to Ninkasi’s suites. “I know this is short notice, but father has again summoned you to an inquiry - about your plans to obtain for him the Emperor’s throne.”

“That’s not unexpected,” I replied, “but we need to stop by Harold the Herald’s quarters to ask that they look after the children while we’re otherwise occupied.”

“Not a problem,” Nabu responded through a huge yawn. His betrothed has apparently been keeping him awake at night. He looked happy, though.

After making apologies to Harold and his wife, Maude, we proceeded towards the Royal Chambers. We’d made an agreement with Harold and Maude that we would tend to the kids during the daytime, if they would return the favor in the evening. We did forewarn them about this inquiry, though. They were gracious about it.

When Harold is not making a presentation, he is soft-spoken and tends to let his wife speak for his household. She all but worships her husband, and their children are so animated and fun to hang out with, they haven’t been a challenge to supervise. Very polite when dealing with their elders. Then again, I suppose in their eyes, we’re “Gods.” Whatever that means.

After taking our respective places in the conference room, the Royal Couple arrived. We exchanged greeting hugs and kisses and returned to our seats.

“I don’t even know where to start with this,” Marduk announced.

Sarpanit chimed in: “Surely, a great war would ensue if Marduk were to demand the Throne be returned to him! I cannot believe the House of Enlil would stand for this, under any circumstances.”

“We’re going to play the game of ‘we’ll take the high road’ with them,” I informed the Empress and Emperor, then added, “And don’t call me ‘Shirley!’”

(*Nothing. No response to my joke, just blank stares. Some Beings! Just no fun, I tells ya!*)

“We are going to appeal to the Imperial Court to decide this matter. We are going to let them know that we do not seek war, but **justice**!”

No one interrupted me. Nabu nodded. Marduk stroked his chin, deep in thought. Sarpanit looked hopeful. Ninkasi looked aroused.

“I’ll be by your side, but we should bring along an assortment of supporters, should we be able to convince them to join us.” I looked them all in the eyes. “I’m pretty certain we can count on the support of Durga. And if I am successful in another little miracle I have in the works, we might could bring along Dysnomia. Just the sight of those two will give them pause to consider the consequences of making war on us.

“Throngs of Human Kings will rally to our sides, with the thought of those two – along with Nabu - at the head of our forces.”

Nabu interrupted me at that point. “Don’t leave out your House! You are already being proclaimed as the mightiest Human to have ever walked the Earth.”

I rolled my eyes.

Ninkasi added, “When Autonomia and Savannah the Reaper beheaded the court jester’s co-conspirators - all in an instant, all throughout the city - many, many people were treated to the sight of gleeful girls who briefly materialized from out of nowhere and cut off those heads.”

“Little Autonomia and young Savannah have been proclaimed to be manifestations of your wrath,” Nabu told me.

Sarpanit snickered a little. “Some people were profoundly disturbed to see the girls all took only two forms,” she said, “and they were so joyful at the task!”

Nabu stated, “Little shrines have already appeared near the places where some bodies fell. The people are eager to placate those raging spirits!”

We all gave a little chuckle about that.

“Of course,” Marduk spoke up, “the House of Enlil will be present before the Emperor, and upset about the possibility of me taking the Throne again.”

“If either Enlil or his shithead son, Sin, raise any objections, I’ll deal with them.” I threatened. “I cannot believe the Imperial Council has not had Sin executed. He’s broken far too many taboos.” I was getting angrier as I spoke.

“Will you calm down, Gaian?” Marduk beseeched me, though he looked to be very amused by my outburst.

“As the first Human to stand before the Emperor and speak on behalf of the Human race – and the living Earth herself – I may…well…” I thought the better of revealing my plans. “I may be difficult to placate, if given permission to speak.”

“It would help your case immeasurably if you could convince Lady Ki to accompany us,” Nabu suggested.

“I hadn’t thought of that!” I said, nonplussed that something so obvious had failed to occur to me. She is Enlil’s mother. And was allegedly his wife at some point. She was originally Emperor Anu’s wife, before there was an Empire.

“I’m also going to bring up Enlil’s House’s crimes with regards to their illegal tourist traps, using Humans as bait.” I licked my lips and continued: “We’ve already hosted a major war on Earth because of that, and Enlil’s House took the opportunity to use forbidden weapons, technology, and techniques to destroy entire regions of the Earth. They were covering their tracks, in some instances.”

“And, considering that we’ll have the use of two entire fleets of starships to utilize to transport Human warriors to your homeworld – and almost all of them are warships! We could even have them parked in orbit as we meet with the Emperor, just to make sure we have everybeing’s undivided attention,” I further conjectured.

“And, Nabu,” I added, “I can think of no one I’d rather have succeed your father to the throne than you!”

Both Nabu and Marduk smiled at that thought.

“But, in order to toss Enlil’s House a bone, would you be willing to agree that the Thone pass to Enlil’s House, once you decide you’ve had enough of Court life?” I asked. “And you’ll be the one to determine who deserves the honor?”

“And what if I can find no one amongst Enlil’s House who deserves the honor?” Marduk’s heir asked in return.

“That would be a difficulty to be overcome at a later date.” I confessed.

“So many promises made to my husband were broken,” Sarpanit mused, “along with their House’s breaking of taboos. It would be well within our House’s rights to proclaim that Enlil’s House produces nothing but miscreants, unworthy of the Throne!”

Marduk took his Queen’s hand. It was clear to see who was responsible for transforming arrogant, impetuous Marduk into the humble, yet still mighty, Being he is today. It was also obvious she had great faith in his power and authority.

I took Ninkasi’s hand in mine. Just out of affection, upon seeing those two. They were unquestionably two who were worthy of rule.

“And what if the House of Enlil **does** threaten retaliation, should I obtain the Throne?” Marduk demanded of me.

“Leave them to me,” I bid them. “Their objections will NOT stand! Not as long as I am present before the Emperor.”

Sarpanit smiled at me and said, “Gaian, please calm yourself!”

“I *love* it when he gets like this!” Ninkasi sighed.

“And I’m going to look into your People’s need for gold. Between Savannah, Autonomia, Nabu, and myself, we can likely figure out a more permanent solution for your homeworld’s atmospheric problems,” I let them know.

“In addition to what I’ve brought up today, I have a few surprises in mind to win the Emperor’s throne for you,” I promised. “They are dependent upon how a few other things turn out, between now and then.”

For instance, I wanted Dummuzi to be in charge of the fleets of warships. And I was giving some thought to having Inanna present before the Emperor, chained and bound within an iron cage. And threaten to unleash and arm her, if things didn’t go the way I desired.

Marduk was thoughtful for a few seconds. The rest of us remained quiet. Finally, he said, “I think I’ve heard all that I need to know about this matter.”

He looked to his son. “Keep us informed about when the right time to request an audience before the Emperor is near. And Gaian,” he looked at me with his eyes full of hope and dread. “I’m already beginning to think of you as a friend - a valuable friend and ally. Let me know now if this is really something you are committed to seeing through to the end.”

“I pledge my Immortal life to you, Lord Marduk,” I vowed. “I will stand by your side in this struggle until it resolves itself in a manner pleasing to our two Houses.”

Marduk said nothing, but rose from his throne and took his wife’s hand in his. Nabu nodded to us and left on their heels. No doubt, he wanted to return to his fiancé. Just as Ninkasi was insistent we return to her chambers.

Savannah rejoined us for the evening meal. She’d spent the afternoon as a tourist, with Harold’s kids. She informed us of the highlights of their day – including her visit to the legendary Hanging Gardens. My first hired staff member – Ian, the Courier – accompanied them.

Not long after that, we visited Nabu and Nanaya to wish them well once again. We stopped to thank Marduk and Sarpanit once again.

We visited the Royal Stables in order to fetch our magical mounts, and to obtain a wagon to transport our new-found wealth back to my place. I even had to purchase a couple of oxen to haul the wagon. Ninkasi's servants helped us load it.

After taking a lunch break in Ninkasi's suites, we prepared to leave. After kissing Ninkasi farewell, Savanah and I gained our saddles, Chloe took the reins to the oxen, and we called on the clouds to take us to our respective destinations.

My party made a brief stop at my place and dropped off the wagon for my servants to unload. I didn't know I had servants. Savannah apparently recruited her friends and servants into my service.

We promised to return shortly, then made our way to Ninkasi's Sacred Halls.

The Hootenanny, Night Four – Hoedown!

First of all – that's not what you think it means. It's a square dance. Okay?

Day four of the Hootenanny is when Ninkasi breaks out some surprise.

It's not like she tries to outdo herself, year after year. That could get old after a while. And, there'd eventually be a stopping point – a grand event so monumental that no amount of preparation, work, or forethought could possibly top, so…it ends there. No one wants that. Still, sometimes things just happen.

Oftentimes, her surprises were just special brews that fit the evening's theme. When she first established this tradition, night four was just for her to show off a new brew, which she would declare to be her best effort to date. And each one would be, actually. Like any decent CraftsGoddess, while working on a particular project, she couldn't help but be inspired to think of some way to improve upon her current work. Like "If I had let the wort brew for another…, this would taste…" or "This would be so much better with *(X)* hops instead of (*the ones she used*)." You get the idea.

One year, the unimaginable happened: Her cellar became infected with yucky yeasts, and they ruined quite a lot of her work. As a result, she didn't have anywhere near the amount of brew available as she normally would.

But, people were ready to celebrate! Just as the Harvest Festival was getting underway, news came of a decisive victory in some war in some far-flung region of the Empire. Such a decisive victory, the war was now all but surely over. The obnoxious forces, all but no more.

Some of the victorious soldiers even came directly from the battlefields to Ninkasi's place. As one could well imagine, they were quite, very thirsty. This one is (now) commemorated as the 2nd most memorable of all Ninkasi's Harvest Festivals. With a commemorative stela one passes on the way to the Grand Stairway.

The unimaginable happened on the fourth night, back then, as I told you earlier: Ninkasi ran out of beer!

Yeah. Stuff like that is the sort of thing that messes with one's sense of reality. It can drive one nuts!

I mean, one minute, everybeing's laughing and dancing and having a jolly time of it, then Ninkasi clamors for everybeings' attention.

"Excuse me, everything!" she shouted when the crowd grew quiet. "As I've mentioned to you all before, we had a catastrophic infection here, and lost a great deal of brew.

"Now, I had no idea how things would turn out, but we were not prepared for a huge influx of our brave, victorious warriors." She was briefly drowned out by cheers. After many of the soldiers had taken their bows, she continued: "This has never happened before," she began to tear up with embarrassment and regret, "but we are going to run out of beer tonight."

A murmur of shock ran through her halls. Many were stunned with disbelief. Some were angry. Some were offended. Some just wanted more damned beer, fer fucksake! Just fought a war, you know…and, "Not to worry, lass – that's not MY blood – heh, heh!"

There is no way the Goddess of Brewing – not a fighter herself, as of then – could have foreseen what was to come when she had her servants roll out the final three, untapped kegs of beer to the head of the Grand Stairway and announced "These are the last three kegs I have, and we'll soon have to tap them! After that, I suppose, the Harvest Festival will come to an early conclusion."

She had more to say – cautions to remain calm, assurances that everything present could count on having at least two more pints, and just beg their forgiveness, and she will see to it that it never happens again. She'd already fed the servants in charge of cleaning the cellars to some of the Titans. Which, BTW, is what led to her purchase of Chloe and Zoe.

But, she didn't get a chance to make her reassuring remarks, as there came an immediate surge of Beings up the stairs, shouting battle-cries of "They're OURS!" or the variant "…mine!" or "To ME, lads!" and/or "Get away from those kegs!"

Some of the drunker guests were so drunk at that point, they merely turned their backs to the sudden, violent commotion and puked. Some of the more cowardly ones fled, while the more level-headed ones stood back to let the combatants thin one another's ranks out before they decided on a course of action.

Meanwhile, the Stairway became a killing field. Well – I exaggerate a bit. The actual dead only numbered in the lower three digits, and most of them were demigods/goddesses no one really misses. Or aspects – like Savannah is an aspect of her mother, Ki – and are somewhat easily replaced. Still, there were a few Titans who met their end there, in the Battle of the Remaining Kegs, and a dozen or so of the Ancients. Their losses had greater repercussions. They usually had charge of some thing or the other. "Lord of the North Wind," say. Their losses created job

openings. Kinda shook things up for a while, until suitable Beings were found for the vacant positions.

Don't laugh – such matters are not quite as predictable as one might think. Like, a well-respected War Leader might have just had a good-luck streak, and isn't All That Brave, when faced with a formidable opponent. A "Lord of War" should NEVER take a look across the battlefield, drop its weapons, turn, run, and leave a smelly, dirty trail as it flees. It's just… gauche! (*Is that still a thing, gauche?)*

It took a while for things to get settled. And the commemorative stela erected for that evening's events even goes so far as to add a footnote, giving thanks Dysnomia was busy slaughtering the remnants of the defeated enemy in some far-flung reach of the Empire. I mean, if SHE had been there, who knows how many of Ninkasi's guests would have survived? It's kinda difficult to stop her, once she gets to slaughtering. And she makes it look so easy! Also, she has the unique ability to look really, *REALLY* hot when she's covered in blood. And otherwise completely naked. Chest heaving, huge, bright smile on her face! So hot.

And, in case you're wondering – the battle-tested warriors made quick work of those who stood between themselves and the remaining kegs, set up a defensive perimeter around them and waited until all the killing was done. Then, they generously sheathed their swords and allowed Ninkasi's servants to portion out one of the kegs, while they helped themselves to the other two.

Oh, sure, there were mumblings of dissent from the non-combatants, which caused the warriors to begin to unsheathe their swords again, until somebeing proclaimed "Come to think of it, ya'll DID win those kegs, fair-and-square!" which created a stir of consent amongst the survivors, caused the swords to once again be dropped. Music and merriment returned to the hall for a few hours.

Oh, but…the 3rd most memorable Harvest Festival was more along Ninkasi's style. The theme that year was sort of a "throwback" to the old days. Ninkasi made one of her old-fashioned Strong Brews for night four.

Every, single Being present passed out drunk, before midnight. And woke up puking their guts – or whatnot – out. Some of them had to swallow 'em back up! This was a very influential night in Ninkasi's later development. It inspired her to create the Revitalizing Brew, for one thing. It also caused her to be careful with the old recipes. If she trotted a cask of one out, there would be a warning label attached. Well, not so much a warning label, as a commemorative ribbon which proclaimed "100 Percent KO Reserve." And she never had more than one such brew available per day – that is to say, only one keg or cask.

Ninkasi is quite, very pleased she scored a perfect, 100 percent KO on her guests. The commemorative stela for that evening is at the head of the Grand Stairway, where the Goddess of Brewing stands when she wishes to address the attendees of her Festivals.

Wanna know a secret? When Ninkasi strolled through the smelly piles of un-and-semiconscious Beings that night, she'd prod one with her toes to see if they were still sorta awake. If she found one groggy but still moving, she'd have a servant help the Being sit upright, while handing it another beer. Ninkasi would then offer a toast to the guest "…who has outdrunk every Being present." And she'd toss down a gulp or two from her own goblet.

What choice would one have? Here was the Divine Hostess Herself offering a toast to one! Of course, one would be compelled to raise the proffered goblet to one's lips, maw, or whatnot.

And drink. More of a brew at least 140 proof. Which would most likely KO that Being as well. When it sagged and dropped its arms/tentacles/whatnot to the ground, Ninkasi would have the servant give the Being a shake and drop it. If it didn't move, she'd move on to the next Being. She was not going to settle for anything less than a 100 percent KO.

Ninkasi had something very special in mind for the Harvest Hootenanny – a Square Dance!

Now, it would not be wrong to assume there were very few Beings present who could Square Dance properly.

For those of you who have never been to a barnyard hoedown, what happens is, one has a place set aside for musicians, and many, many refreshments available. No one can predict when a hoedown will run its course, or run out of steam. In days gone by, some hosting entities would not allow for an ending. The guests would just leave when they had enough, or had to get on with their lives, etc. Also, it helps if one has musicians in reserve. Because, when the hoedown is hot, one cannot stop. It's just Not Done. In addition to a round-the-clock supply of musicians who can jam all night to a ridiculously upbeat tempo, and plenty of refreshments to keep the dancer's energy level up, one must provide the celebrants with a huge dance floor. Ninkasi's Grand Hall is just such a place – all but custom-made for such an event.

Even the unexpected arrival of a new commemorative stela, memorializing Chloe, Zoe, Savannah, and Autonomia's Divine, Killer Gangbang, as it's come to be known, square in the middle of the hall could not adversely affect the dancing. Half the fun of square dancing is dodging. Dodging tables, dodging other dancers, dodging Beings who have Overdone It and are puking, Beings who Ain't What They Used To Be, who sometimes stumble and fall. You get the idea. Fun! In fast-forward!

The only other thing absolutely necessary to a truly magnificent hoedown is a really, very gifted caller.

Square dancing, when done properly, is totally improvised. The caller claps its hands/claws/mandibles/whatnot in time to the music and gives instructions to the dance crowd. Mayhem on the dance floor! Everybeing is laughing and having a good time. And a really gifted caller can pepper in jokes, pull surprise moves, and make Beings do things they would otherwise be too embarrassed to do, like bend over and flip up their skirt. But, see – one has to do what the caller says, otherwise everybeing will think one is No Fun.

The challenge for the Beings in attendance at Ninkasi's Hootenanny would be; they would have no idea what the caller was raging on about. Who amongst them has ever gotten down at a hoedown? Likely none of them. Except for Ninkasi, who lived for a time amongst humans and got to know our ways. (*Ah, Ninkasi…I love her so much – one has no idea. She's a real charmer*.)

Also, none amongst them had either the experience or the chops to be a decent caller. But – she's not a Party Goddess for nothing, my dear wife. She made a brew that would not only enable her guests to understand the actions the caller called for, but would compel all who stood on the dancefloor to do them! Language barriers be damned! Even Beings who communicated by rubbing their cilia-covered hindlegs together would understand what to do and be instantly able to do the move or approximate it well enough to remain in the flow of the dance.

She also made a special additive to brush into a goblet, chosen at random, and replaced in the piles of goblets available with each keg. With every empty keg, a new pile of goblets was also

brought out with the replacement keg. This special additive would cause the imbibee to start clapping, make its way to the piles of hay around the DKG stela, and begin to call the next dance.

Now, how fun is that? Ever been to a party this crazy? And the best part? She didn't let anyone – not **any**being – know what she was up to. And, after she addressed the crowd before the evening's festivities commenced, she intended to hand the goblet with the caller's additive to her wife. If anyone knows better how to party than Ninkasi, it's Eris. And this was going to be her time to shine, as Goddess of Chaos on the Dancefloor.

Ninkasi made her way to the pile of hay around the latest commemorative stela in her Grand Hall. Everybeing toasted her arrival.

She wore a white, button-down work shirt with the sleeves rolled halfway up her arms. She sported a straw hat, her hair in pigtails, and she had bib overalls on. Skin-tight bib-overalls, I should add. And she'd blacked out one of her front teeth. And drawn some ridiculously fake freckles on her face. Any idea how cute she looked that night? Any idea at all? No, one does not. One had to have been there.

I was busy, but anxious to attend the Hoedown, once I took care of a bit of a problem I'd noticed. I think I mentioned earlier that Eris was being short-changed in the love-making. I decided I'd spend a lot of time that night, hustling her away from the crowd and returning her 1/10th of a second before I snatched her away.

As she joined Ninkasi – my other wife in a very cute, Square Dancing dress – I reached out from a cloud and grabbed her by an arm. As I pulled her into my Sacred Grotto, I told her "Don't worry, love – you'll be back before anyone knows you left." And I just flat-out ravaged her for like half the night. Then, I used my hands to body paint some hotpants and a tubetop on her and returned her to the hay bales, next to our wife.

Eris wasn't gone long enough for Ninkasi to have noticed, and she was standing directly next to her, holding her hand. Give me credit here – that was smooth. Except for the costume change. Ninkasi couldn't help but notice the costume change. Also, Eris was all but completely out of breath and unsteady on her feet. Not what one wants to see in a caller for the first dance of the Hoedown.

Ninkasi has learned, over the years, to anticipate. Nothing specific, just anticipate. She has strategies to handle the unexpected. She raised her hand and snapped its fingers. Zoe's hand reached out from a little cloud hovering nearby and handed a goblet full of the Revitalizing Brew to her Mistress. My wives had just reached the hay bales when I swooped on Eris. Ninkasi had made certain they'd taken their time to reach the bales, so everybeing would have time to get a fresh goblet after they'd drained one when they toasted her arrival.

The Brewing Goddess reached into a breast pocket on her work shirt and pulled out a little pill made of the Caller's Additive. She promptly dropped it into the Revitalizing Brew and handed it to Eris. Then shouted, "To my super-hot wife, Eris!"

"Hail, Eris!" came the response, and everybeing was well on their way to getting monumentally drunk. They'd downed two pints of Ninkasi's beer in less than five minutes.

Eris shook her head and gave her wife a quizzical look. She wanted to open her mouth to ask Ninkasi a question, but Ninkasi pulled her close and whispered "Just go with it, my love!" and gave our wife a brief peck on her lips.

She wasn't sure what Ninkasi meant – I'd said something sorta similar to her before I ravaged her, a little while earlier. But, she's a gamer, our wife, so she just went with it, and began to clap her hands. The musicians onstage quickly snatched up their instruments and set off a few explosives to get the crowd's attention, as Eris looked around, totally befuddled.

She wasn't alone. Nothing knew what was going on, as they suddenly paired up in time to Eris's clapping, then arranged themselves into clusters of four pairs.

When the music kicked into gear, Eris shouted out:

> "Take your partner by the hand,
> Now swing 'em round! Left and right grand,
> Now promenade -
> And rip and snort!"

And the Hoedown was off to a grand start. After about five minutes of calling, Eris began to get the hang of it and started making her own calls. Once she realized the dancers were **compelled** to follow her instructions, she gave them orders like:

> "Swing your partner round again, C'mon boys! Kick their butts! Now turn around and round again. Ladies - kick 'em in the nuts! Hands and knees, boys! Chase your tails, dogs! Jump on their backs, girls – Squeal like hogs!"

Had there been any doubt in anybeing's mind as to whether or not Eris still held somewhat of a grudge against the rest of them for destroying Tiamat, I'm pretty sure their doubts were put to rest that evening. She certainly DID remember what they'd all agreed to do to her former self, and was none too pleased. After all this time.

She'd made so little headway in her efforts to win them over by becoming the ultimate Party Monster, and Playful Party Gal of them all. Why, she'd fucked the majority of them to within an inch of their lives at one time or the other. You'd think that would mean something to them, but - no!

She also became an Olympic Sports Legend. Which is a story for another time. The thing is – her efforts to charm her way into their good graces were lost on the Immortals. Indeed, her performances at the Olympics only served to remind the Others just how powerful she is. One time, she showed up on the final day of the Decathlon severely hungover and *(…let's just go ahead and get back to the story at hand…*)

Eris had the dancers knock one another to the ground. Poke one another in the eye at random. And just as she came up with a suitable rhyming scheme to have them decapitate one another, she noticed Ninkasi, as our wife stood before her, arms folded across her breasts, one foot impatiently a-tap, a Very Displeased look on her face. Eris backed down a bit after that – the quote above was the worst she had them do from that point on.

Fortunately for the attendees, each dance only lasted around 15 minutes, before a break was offered and a new caller began to clap.

One of the highlights of the evening was when one of the Truly Ancients took a turn as caller. Despite only being able to grunt and roar, his calling called for more athleticism than all the others. He had half of them…

"Toss one's partner in the air,
To land on earth, no one knows where.
Go on, catch the nearest one!
Try to gag (her…?) with one's tongue!"

(translation only approximate.)

One has no idea about the fun we all had that night. Especially me, as I would randomly pop away with a concubine or wife, and return her to the dancefloor mid-swing – knees weak, body painted, love drunk – still compelled to dance. After finding their legs again, they usually squealed with glee.

Ninkasi was the most fun and enthusiastic of the bunch. Soon as we reached my Grotto, SHE pounced on ME! I didn't body paint her like the others, but returned her without the overalls, and her shirt merely tied below her boobs. I did take care to paint shorts on her, though.

I took two shifts as a musician, too. Which was loads of fun for me, if no one else. I was kinda disappointed not to get a go as caller. Savannah did. And she had them undressing one another, making out with random others, and probing one another's orifices.

Although it wasn't honored with a stela, most Beings would agree – the Harvest Hootenanny was one for the ages, and the Hoedown stands apart as the highlight of Ninkasi's Grandest Harvest Festival, ever.

The Long Wait…

Ninkasi woke Savannah and me up around mid-afternoon. "Hey, lazybutts!" she admonished us. "The Hootenanny's over, and sooo many Beings expressed their disappointment, because you weren't present to see them off." She shook us. "The both of you, as well as Autonomia."

"Weeeell," I slowly drawled, "I hope you made apologies for us, along the lines of 'Oh, these Everywheners just can't keep track of time!' or something to that effect." I grabbed Ninkasi and pulled her onto her bed and gave her a steamy kiss. I kinda miss that version of my wife. She was a little cuter, and had more to her personality. Yeah – even her personality was cuter.

Ninkasi was pouting. "You know, I have responsibilities, as one of the Hostesses of the Sacred Feasts," she reproved us. "And it's just not fair for you to run off with your concubines or Eris, or some other hot little trollop and leave me here to attend to my duties." (*Ninkasi just referred to Ki and Dysnomia as "hot little trollops" just then – for those keeping score at home*.)

"Oh, my darling," I halfway apologized to her. "Most of the time, I'd just be in your way!" I gave her an affectionate squeeze and kissed her forehead. "And all this is still new to me – I've been here less than a year…"

“Five days,” she corrected me. “You arrived here five days ago!” she looked vexed.

“Six of one, half a dozen of the other…” I offered.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she pressed me for clarity.

“I guess it loses something in translation,” I admitted. “But, I’ve spent more than a month just with you.” I reminded her. She looked thoughtful for a few seconds.

“Sometimes, I think of that as a dream,” she surmised. “But, there’s no doubt about it – your mortal form is dead and gone.” She looked sad.

“And something else…” she slowly revealed to us. “It has to do with Eris.”

She pushed herself up with her arms. “Everything was being so gracious to her today! Lots of them even leaned over and kissed her cheeks! Nothing like that has *ever* happened before. The Others have been cordial to her, but a little distant and cold. Now, it seems like many of them have some amount of affection for her.”

“Well, where is she?” I queried.

“She should be right behind me,” Ninkasi stated. We waited a few seconds in silence, while Savannah rolled a little farther away from us so as to allow us to make room for the Goddess of Chaos when she arrived. Which she did, fairly promptly.

“Oh, hi everyone!’ She crawled onto the bed on her knees and leaned over for greeting kisses from her spouses. Afterwards, she settled onto my side to relax with the rest of us.

“You’re right on time!” Ninkasi chirped. “Gaian was just asking about you.”

That made her happy, she gave me a squeeze.

“Okay, I have something to share with the two of you,” I revealed. “and it has to do with Marduk.” Ninkasi rolled her eyes and looked angry, while Eris became tense all of a sudden.

“How do you replay images and sounds from earlier?” I sought from them.

“Just ask the clouds!” the three of them chorused.

“Okay, clouds…” I had to think for a second. “I want you to show us something from my first morning here,” I gave it some more thought. “While Marduk and I were sitting up and talking to one another.” Inspiration struck me like lightning. “Oh – when he rose to his feet and made a toast!”

The clouds above the bed dutifully parted and displayed images of Marduk and I talking whilst seated on the lower steps of the Grand Stairway.

Marduk took to his feet and raised his glass high into the air. All eyes fixated on his impressive form. “To the sexiest, most beautiful female anything, ever: Eris!” he proclaimed. Stunned silence greeted his pronouncement, and several Beings fainted.

Then, I stood and seconded my drinking buddy. “**To Eris!**” I shouted.

“**To the sexiest, most beautiful female anything, ever: Eris!**” Marduk’s proclamation was amplified by those still standing. Followed a few seconds later by a ground-shaking shattering and clattering of goblets and flagons on the Grand Hall’s floor.

“Okay, that’s plenty!” I said, while I gave Eris a reassuring hug.

We laid there in silence. For quite a while.

“I don’t expect you and Marduk to become friends, my love,” I stage-whispered, “but we seem to have common goals in mind for the future, the Emperor of Babylon and I. And there seems to be a certain amount of affection between his House and myself.” Eris was in tears. I think she didn’t know how to assimilate everything being revealed to her in such a short time. She was overcome with emotions she had no idea how to handle. Lots of them. All over the place.

“And if you will allow me,” I pled with her, “I can arrange it so that Marduk both explains himself, and apologizes to you.” I thought about it for a second. “I can actually get him to explain himself right now, in the conversation we had prior to his toast.”

Eris was in shock. Ninkasi sat up and tossed herself across me and squirmed her way between us in order to take our wife into her arms. “Darling, I’m going to hold you while Gaian continues with this. I think it needs to happen, and also that it explains why the Others are being so nice to you recently.”

Eris didn’t move, didn’t say a word. She was still staring at the display, which had frozen with Marduk gleefully slamming his glass on the floor.

“Clouds, go back a little further in my interaction with Marduk.” I gave it some more thought. “Just as Chloe had brought us our tray of drinks.”

Marduk spoke quietly about his attack on Tiamat, the feelings it provoked in him, and his regret. “That’s good!” I shouted. “That’s all we need of the display!”

The clouds came back together. And we all laid on the bed in silence.

Savannah was restless, though. She kept tossing and turning on her side of the crowded bed. She finally took to her knees. And began to undress.

“I have to agree with Marduk and the rest of them!” she explained herself. “And I’ve wanted you since I first saw

you!” she told Eris before she dove over Ninkasi and me and landed just past Eris. She didn’t wait for Eris to react, and began to strip her of her clothes. Ninkasi’s not one to feel left out, so she began to undress me. When it comes to hanging out with Goddesses on one of their/our beds, I’m a “go-with-the-flow” kinda guy, so I began to undress Ninkasi.

Up until that moment, I have to declare, in the back of my mind I was somewhat indignant over the fact I’d not had a threesome with my wives. I mean, it had been five days since we met and married. (*Or…five months…whatever, I don’t even care anymore!*) Just how long can a guy be expected to await the most divine moment of his lives to arrive? Huh?

Well, the fact that there was a fourway free-for-all about to ensue more than made up for the wait. This was souped-up Savannah Dawn here, plus enhanced Ninkasi, plus the sexiest, most beautiful female anything, ever! I felt very good about my place in the universe at that moment.

I ***really*** feel like I'm rubbing it in, at this point. Well…it's just…I have stories to tell, you know…?